

PORTLETHEN THE WAR YEARS

BY ISOBEL LAW.

My childhood memories of life on a farm and Portlethen's part in World War 11 by

Isobel Law (nee Donald).

My ancestors farmed the lands of Aberdeen until the 1920's .My great grandfather in Rosehill Farm ; my father was born in Back Hilton and after my grandfather died my father farmed Smithfield Woodside . My mother was brought up at Mastrick Farm , other relations farmed at Ellon and Durriss .

My parents married and set up home at Bishopston Portlethen , where my two brothers and I were born.

Memories flood back of playing rounders in the close with our friends from school and the children from the cotter house. We also played hide and seek and swam in the burn where my brothers had dammed it to give us more depth of water .My father fortunately was not aware of this engineering event. I also recall the hay making where we wound the hay round a chain attached to the horses harness and fixed it under big heaps of hay , then the joy of running to lie on top of the " coals " to save them from tumbling over and also enjoying the free smooth ride as the horse dragged it towards the field gate where one of the workers forked it up to another who then built the stack . Then there was the harvesting of the barley and corn , the kitchen was full of nice smells of pancakes and girdle scones . Little milk cans were filled with freshly made tea and the warm scones and pancakes were buttered and spread with jam .The maids and I used to go to the field to give the men the longed for refreshments .

My memory only recalls sunny skies, yes I am still writing about Portlethen .The next harvest was the lifting of the potato crop and the children got what was called their "Tattie" Holidays all hands were required for this back breaking task . There were not many children available near Bishopston and aquads of folk from Aberdeen arrived at 8 o'clock in the morning. Most of these folk had never set foot on a farm before and if they lasted out the week or more they really didn't want to see one again . They had discovered muscles they didn't

know they had and wished that they had never discovered them . WE also had a visit from a shepherd to rest his flock and dogs for a couple of days as he travelled on foot through Scotland to the sheep sales. This was a novelty for us as we didn't have sheep and we loved watching the dogs at work .

There was another event that caused a big stir on the calendar , the threshing mill . The day it arrived there was a great bustle in the kitchen , besides the four farm workers , three maids , the family of five , workers from other farms came and worked so they all had to be fed . Happily for the ladies the men followed the mill around the various farms in the area and were fed where they were working , though there was no sitting around for the ladies . The men slept in the bothy so it had to be cleaned , the fire set and beds changed . The mattresses were large bags like duvet covers which were filled with chaff . The covers were washed and filled with fresh chaff when the corn was bruised . The maids slept in a room above the kitchen . The kitchen floor was concrete and was scrubbed everyday after lunch time . The eggs were collected twice a day while the hens were being fed . The eggs had to be wiped clean and packed in sections in a box or rolled in newspaper in three for private orders. The milking was done by hand three times a day for some of the cows and twice a day for others. The times of milking were 4.30 am , 12 noon and 4.30 pm . The milk was carried to the dairy and put through coolers , it was then put into 10 and 5 gallon cans ready for pick up the next morning at 6.30 am. There were wide basins in the dairy and this was for the household milk , when the cream rose to the top of the milk it was skimmed off and churned into butter . Now that was another thing that we were fond of doing for a little while " ca"n" the handle to turn the barrel round . Eventually the cream turns into curds and the whey is washed out to rid the butter of a sour taste then salt can be added.

My mother's equipment was very modern , but no electricity all manual labour . The stove in the kitchen was called the range , this was a big black steel affair which had to be cleaned with a liquid of blacklead and the trim with metal polish to save it from going rusty , besides that there was a paraffin stove with an oven. It is amazing what was baked in that little oven, sponge cakes , shortbread , and even wedding cakes . Then there was the washing machine , no not a Hoover or a Bendix but a Jiffy . This was a galvanised square box on

four legs with a wooden handle on the lid and attached to it inside were two paddles . The clothes , hot water and soap powder were put in, the lid was closed and secured then the handle was pushed back and forth until you thought your arm would drop off ,The white clothes e.g damask table covers , linen shirts etc, were all put into a big boiler in the outside wash house . Under the boiler was a grate and care always had to be taken before it was lit just in case a farm cat and it's kittens had snuggled up inside for warmth. After the clothes were clean they were put through a wringer which consisted of two rubber rollers , this got rid of excess water, similar to today's spin drier .Sheets were folded neatly when dry and put through a mangle. A mangle is a similar machine to the wringer but had two large rollers which could be screwed up or down to adjust to the width of the material . The ironing was originally done by heating special shaped stones in the coal fire and when they were red hot they were lifted out by being hooked through a hole at one end of the stone and dropped into a box iron which had a trap door . Then came the next modern gadget, the petrol iron .It was a similar style to today's iron but it had a ball shaped tank which was attached to the end of the handle and flames were like a gas fire between the top and the base . Ironing then was not a simple task no minimum ironing materials then. All Materials were either cotton, linen, silk etc., shirt collars were mostly separate from the shirt and had to be starched as were linen sheets, there were great difficulties in avoiding scorching them. Clothes were heavy woollen garments and jumpers and socks were all hand knitted . Plenty time for knitting and reading. No television or central heating in those days , no electric or gas fires just blue noses till the fires were lit and depending how cold it was the rooms were no hot for an hour or two later. If anyone was ill the fires in the bedrooms were kept burning but that meant all the more physical work carrying buckets of coal through the house and up the stairs , then the grates had to be cleaned .

The kitchen was lit at night by a paraffin tilly lamp and our family sitting room had lamps with mantles which would smoke if turned up too high. The protective glass would get in a mess and had to be cleaned every day . We either used small gas paraffin lamps or candles to walk along the passages or to go to bed. Speaking of lights , during the war there were no street lights and all the car lights were hooded and windows at home and in other buildings

were all blacked out. This was so that the enemy planes would find it difficult to find a target at night .

Every week oatcakes were made and baked in a girdle on top of the range then they were dried off on a guard in front of the open fire. Lots of oatmeal was used for porridge , brose , stuffing and skirlie. The meal was delivered in 1cwt. Sacks and stored in big wooden chests called girnels which were kept in the kitchen . On Thursdays the cream was churned and the butter was made into half pound blocks with a fancy pattern on it, then it was wrapped in greaseproof paper ready for packing along with the boxes of eggs and dressed poultry . It was then delivered to the grocer . some private orders but most of the eggs went to the egg grading station at the farmer”s mart at Kittybrewster . Many people with smaller farms either set up stalls in the Green or got others to sell their produce for them.

My memories of Friday mornings were the car being packed with all the dairy produce and before we left for town the staff had been assigned to their tasks on the farm while we were away. At this stage I was either younger than 5 or I was on holiday from school. First we went to a grocer on Great Western Road (it is still a grocers shop) delivered order and left our grocery shopping list to be collected on our way home . No supermarkets then . Mother and I were dropped off on Union Street and father went to the mart to buy or sell cattle . We sometimes had lunch at Strathdees restaurant next to where the hydro board is now . I was fascinated with the lovely wood carvings around the archways leading into the dining room , lovely acorns and vines which made you feel as though you could pick off the grapes . This building was very large with a bakery in the entrance , then a self service , a men”s smoking room downstairs and a large restaurant upstairs . We sometimes visited the hairdresser as well on a Friday .The ladies sat under things like a hair dryer with their hair pulled up in lengths getting it permed , all were very weird to me . Our next visit was to the ironmonger for pot scourers , pots and pans , softsoap to wash the dishes , repairs to the iron etc. From there we went to Peglers at the corner of Bridge Street for fruit , tomatoes etc , then up to Brown the fish shop , situated between Crown Street and Dee Street . Our next visit was to Collies the grocer which was on the corner of Bon Accord exactly where the

bookshop is at present . Oh ! the delicious smells from that shop . The aroma of coffee was felt a long way off on Union Street . They had fancy cakes , sugar mice and chocolate bunnies and other things of less interest to me but never the less delicious , home cooked hams and freshly roasted beef . I drool at the mouth thinking about that shop . My mother was probably in buying cake decorations or birthday candles . We then turned down Justice Mill and met up with Father at Gill's the cattle feed and seeds merchant , lovely materials are now displayed here for the home . We headed back to Great Western Road to pick up our groceries and after a long day this little girl was always glad to get home . I didn't tell you my mother used to meet up with friends in Falconers now Frasers for afternoon tea and naturally I got an ice cream .If we went to Dunns the shoe shop (where the 99p shop is now) I was allowed to stand on the ex- ray machine , look down the funnel and wiggle my toes through my shoes , such magic , we now know it is unwise to use such machines , now I know why my feet are so ugly. On the road into town we always visited grandma and my father would visit grandma's sister who stayed beside the mart . They always got a gift of dairy produce , that was the way of most farming families and the fishermen too supplied their families with their produce . Apart from shopping in town we also got a weekly visit from a butcher , baker and fish man . All came in their vans . Indian gentlemen used to come round with big cases full of haberdashery, underwear etc . These poor souls certainly had long walks .

During the normal days routine the papers were delivered and the news was listened to and the scary message was war is inevitable. Now children pick up fear from adults and as our parents already had come through World War One the anxiety of another war was distressing . Life was about to change. At school we got air raid drill. Big reinforced shelters were built in the playgrounds and in the back gardens of peoples gardens . The thing I hated most of all was when we had to wear gas masks . We carried them everywhere , they were in a cardboard box and were carried like a ladies' shoulder bag . The masks had a little window but I could never see out of it because the mask was so full of condensation .They were made of rubber with a thing like a pigs snoot and you needed both hands to pull it on because it was so tight . Thankfully the enemy never dropped gas bombs so we never had to wear them apart from drill time .

We got a warning if the enemy , who at that time were the Germans was approaching . The warning was short eerie blasts and the all clear was a long hoot . As soon as we heard the sirens we all ran to the shelters in case bombs were dropped .

At home we were sitting targets , the hill Clochandigher at the head of the farm fields was occupied by a camp of soldiers and across the fields towards Causeyport and Badentoy stood the pylons , which I would guess were part of the intelligence world

The camp was the residence of the airmen and the A.T.S. and the fields beside Hillside House were the camps for the WAFFS . The ATS and the Waffs were the female equivalent “airmen and soldiers “ . Our “ air-raid “ shelter was under the stairs . My mother had a pail of syrup in a store-room upstairs and my father thought if we were bombed the syrup would land on his head. We had to have something to joke about . One afternoon while out in the hayfield the rain came on , there were only a handful of us still there because the others had gone home to milk . It was decided the rain was on for good and we also left. Within minutes of getting home an enemy aircraft appeared and started shooting at the cattle in the fields . It still gives me shivers, rain was certainly our saving grace . Most air raids were made under the cover of darkness when the planes dodged under the search lights seeking their targets . However in the summer time they had to take chances and we had the odd nasty call around lunch time. One plane was “ wounded “ and came down where the flats are beside Aberdeen Asda . The building was originally planned to be an ice rink . We also had a plane skim the wood at our side of the house on one of its inspections of the army camp .

When things were getting nasty around the dock yards “bombs falling “ in the south , it was decided by the government to move the children to what was hoped to be safer places . A train load of little children with their name tags attached to their coats , belongings and gas masks were dispatched to Aberdeen and sent to several farms in the area to stay. Since I was ill and my mother had enough on her hands with me it was decided no children would come to stay with us. Poor little souls , bumped with people of all ages and some not too able and also with different accents and different ways .

Then we began to have convoys of the military , bren-gun carriers and trucks pass by the farm . Our life was not like living in London, Liverpool or Glasgow where they were always being bombed but never the less it was still very alarming at times . There was a lighter side to our army visitors stay; When the snow came the soldiers on the hill who were far from their families took great delight in making sledges out of corrugated iron and sledging with us. My mother was a lovely lady and since it was illegal to sell dairy produce to anyone other than those you were registered to sell she would cook and serve eggs to any of the soldiers who came to buy them . Her comment was “ they are someone”s laddies.

Well time went on and Winston Churchill who was Prime Minister at the time gave us such hope when he spoke on the wireless. I later understood that he wasn”t always telling the truth , but his little white lies brought us comfort. There was a fellow known as Lord Ha Ha who was capable of breaking into the airwaves and dishing out propaganda . Who knows he may have been speaking the truth on one or two occasions but we didn”t believe him but loved listening to him. By the way our wireless was a big box with a battery which had to be charged and often failed at the wrong time .

Clothes and food was rationed as was fuel . We all had coupon books and did so into the 1950”s .There were many things not available , such as imported fruit . How we longed for bananas . We seemed to live on spam and mutton . We were fortunate we ate anything and my mother was a terrific cook with a great imagination

Coupons were required for everything from dishcloths, underwear to shoes, and we were lucky our eggs weren”t rationed because we lived on a farm but all other foods were , including our favourite cow candy. Necessity works wonders and the flour was delivered in white cotton sacks just the size of a pillow. Many heads rested on a flour bag after it had been boiled and ironed. The 3lb size came into use as well , they were torn into bandages for those skinned knees or used for holding tea leaves in the urns when there were large functions . No tea bags then. If a friend or neighbour”s daughter was getting married many pulled their coupons together so that the bride could have

enough for the purchase of the material for the wedding gown. Fortunately no coupons were required when we ate out and although the menu was limited it was a great relief especially when a wedding was being planned .

Functions were curtailed because fuel was rationed , but people walked or cycled to the local halls such as Portlethen , Cookney or Ardoe to play whist , enjoy plays , variety concerts and also dances. The Sunday school still had a picnic and Santa visited their Christmas party in the Jubilee hall . We couldn't picnic on the beaches because all round the British-coast huge blocks of concrete were placed to stop the enemy landing with equipment . I think they are all gone now but they certainly graced our harbours .

During the war our father became ill and he gave up the dairy farm and moved to Westside . The house was modernised and an extension added on. Then magic , an engine was installed to generate electricity and another in the middle of the field to pump our water supply . Lethen Park and surrounding homes now sit here . Again things weren't as simple as it is today, permits for building materials were required and craftsmen were scarce because so many were still at war . Those who had been exempted from war duties had to get around by bus or cycle carrying their tools . There was no Focus or B@Q .

Life changed dramatically for all of us and that also included our dogs . The dogs discovered the friendly girls at the camps at Hillside and were so happy to be fed and enjoyed being made a big fuss over. No doubt the girls were homesick and possibly had left pets of their own at home . Would you believe it , it was quite safe for me on my little bike to cycle along the main road to " rescue " the dogs without fear of being run down . It was a two lane road then and often got blocked with snow . When we were at Bishopston the roads were often blocked for more than a week and the horses were saddled up and pulled big sledges to take the milk cans into town and bring back bread etc., for our neighbours and ourselves .

My brothers after leaving school farmed both Westside and Craigwell Netherley , the latter being an out farm when we were at Bishopston. It was long days for them as they had to cycle to Netherley early in the morning and then back home in the evenings . Eventually when one of them was old enough to drive , a car was bought and that was a blessing . Agricultural businesses

were allowed so much fuel if it was deemed necessary. The fuel for the tractors was coloured so that it couldn't be used for any other purpose . It wasn't only my brothers who had long tiring roads to cycle , the district nurse who stayed near Cammachmore , for many years covered Newtonhill , Portlethen and Cookney all by bicycle .Poor lady out all hours and in all kind of weather tending the sick and delivering babies .

I joined Portlethen Sunday school then the bible class and then went on to be a Sunday school teacher and of course I made new friends , (sadly one of my friends who stayed at Mosside lost her only brother in the war). After school I went to a dancing class run by the headmaster wife , Mrs Little . I also joined a badminton class which was started in the Jubilee hall by the church . The bible class was always enjoyed not only because of the getting together and having a laugh after the meetings but also because of the interesting way the Rev Alex Dunn would speak to us .There was nothing stuffy in his method of teaching and because of his happy disposition we were always pleased to be there . Through the church we had some wonderful times , the church board would invite the bible class to their social functions and we in the bible class returned the compliment at a later date . We played beetle or whist and had refreshments afterwards . It may sound boring and stale but it wasn't. The young learned things from the old and the old learned from the young . I quickly learned the lesson that to win at whist was the most serious thing in some of the more (ancient) senior whist players lives and smiles were not allowed . Things have not changed , just as you would do today we got together with our pals and commented about that old grumpy wifie who had been hoping to win . When rationing eased there was a sale of work in the Jubilee hall such as we hold in our present day hall . When the war ended the Portlethen games and youth movements were restored . The games were held in the field beside the Jubilee hall . Several joined the Cookney and District Young Farmer's Club , a marvellous movement where we learned so many crafts and had excellent educational talks .

My brothers though employed by my father both had their own farming schemes and that helped them to buy their farms when they got married . Most farms until that time had been owned by estates and as the owners of the estates retired or died they were put up for sale I went on to the school of

domestic science and after seven years of early mornings and hard work I got married and “retired”)

Sadly I lost one of my brothers but he like my other brother made his mark in this world as have their offsprings .

The story nearly ends , but there is a question . Do you know what happened? Well , the moss opposite Balquharn , was where my brothers cast peats (for us to burn and keep the house warm) and I helped to set up and dry , this is now covered by your homes and further along stands the shopping centre. Mr Andrew Walker’s farm on the moss disappeared as did my friends” the Walkers at Mossie , the Mackies at Muirside and the Manns at Whitebruntland . They are now either bowling greens , schools , swimming pools or shopping centres . Such is progress .

Where am I now? I still have happy meetings with the friends I made at bible class and the young farmers . As for my home , well I suppose that stands on land which may have been farmed by someone many years ago .

Thank you to Isobel Law for allowing us to add her story to the Local History section of Party Info by Ken Watson

(The Heritage Mannie) Fred Stewart ..