

SUSAN BUTLIN  
1950 – 1954

**Second World War**

I was born in April 1940 so I grew up during the War. I was five years old when it finished. I lived in Plymouth which was badly bombed. The centre of the city was destroyed. I do not remember wearing a gas mask or carrying one. During an air raid we sat under the stairs for safety; it was the safest part of the house. We had an electric light in the cupboard and a bench to sit on. My sister's carrycot was placed under the bench. My grandfather, who had been in the Navy during the First World War, would stand on the doorstep with a tin helmet on; he would say, "If them buggers are going to drop a bomb, I want to see it coming." I can remember seeing flashes in the air and searchlights in the sky through the open door. One night I can remember hearing the siren go and getting out of bed before mother came into the bedroom. I was standing there with my eiderdown round me, waiting to be taken downstairs. I was very pleased with myself, to think that I had done it all on my own! I assumed that that was what you did every night.

Bombs were dropped near our house: one fell at the top and one at the bottom of the next street to us; two houses were destroyed. When the War was over, we used to play among the ruins, moving bricks and wood around to make hideaways. I did not realise that the site had been someone's house and home until I was 11 years old and I saw the words "bombed buildings" written down. We used to say, "Where shall we play today? Let's go up the "bomb buildings." We had an incendiary bomb drop on our roof. It came through the ceiling and fell on the landing. My grandfather always had a bucket of water and a stirrup pump handy and he put the fire out. The lino was charred and we placed a rug over it and I can remember seeing the burnt hole whenever the rug moved and revealed it.

I was once evacuated with my mother to a big house at Rattery, outside Plymouth. My mother, Marjorie, was a nurse and looked after an old lady. That was for 6 months. Later, my mother, father and I lived on a farm at Corton Denham, Somerset, whilst my father was stationed at Yeovilton Naval Barracks. When he was sent abroad, we moved back to Plymouth in 1943. I loved living on the farm and can remember my mother and the farmer's wife feeding corn to the chickens. There was an old, huge carthorse called Dobbin, which I used to lead on a rope. He pulled the hay cart which was used during haymaking and I can remember men throwing hay onto the hay pile with old pitchforks. We got water from a well which was still there in 1995 when I revisited.

My father was in the Navy during the War. He was a nurse on Naval Hospital ships and was sent to Malta at one stage. All my uncles were in the Navy or Air Force, except Uncle Arthur who worked in Portsmouth Dockyard; they all survived. My Uncle Charles was on HMS RAMILLIES during the D Day landings in Normandy. I don't think my father talked about his War experiences until he was 80 years old.

We had food and clothing rationing. I can remember when sweets, chocolate and ice cream were in very short supply, I once went down to my local sweet shop

and there were only two jars of sweets on the shelves; the other jars were empty. I was really disappointed because I wanted to buy dolly mixture or gems, which were mini wine gums, but they only had “Drake’s Cushions”, which were mint humbugs. I knew I would only get a few sweets for my 2ozs, whereas I would get lots of dolly mixture. The only time I recall having chocolate or ice-cream was when I came out of school one day and saw my mother queuing with 50 other mothers, waiting to get one ice-cream per ration book from the sweet shop; I can remember what a wonderful treat it was! The ice-cream was in a small carton with a slab of chocolate on top. Occasionally we had food parcels sent to our school and I remember the Head Master, Mr Ward, coming into our classroom and sharing out one small bag of sweets to each child. It was sometimes aniseed and sometimes cocoa powder; the latter we took home and mixed with sugar and ate by dipping our fingers in it – delicious!! I think the parcels came from America. Clothes were rationed and we usually swapped clothes between families. I wore second hand clothes all through the War and only had brand new after 1945. I have a receipt for one pair of ankle socks = 1½ coupons. We did not eat oranges or bananas until the War ended but since I had never known what they tasted like, I did not miss them. We could get a bag of chips for 2d (= ½p). We had ration books and identity cards. I still have my own card and my mother’s and my sister’s.

I didn’t meet any Allied troops during the War. My father did not come home until 1946, when my sister was 3½ years old. She had never seen him and was scared of him and did not like him. Putting his arm around my mother, I can see her now, pulling at her skirt to pull her away from my father. I do remember celebrating VE Day. We were staying with my Grandmother Butlin in Portsmouth. On May 8<sup>th</sup>, all the adults in the house seemed to go mad. They pulled apart the chicken runs in the back garden and made a bonfire in the middle of the road, Bosham Road. When it got dark, they lit it and danced around, singing and hugging each other. I can recall the flames and sparks flying into the dark sky. They let us stay up and I thought it was great not being put to bed until quite late. I had no idea what they were celebrating but I knew the adults were very happy. People from another bonfire came down to ours when someone threw water over theirs.

Overall, my most vivid memories include waking up when the siren went, seeing my grandfather on the doorstep with his tin helmet on, the farm at Corton Denham and VE night.

## PLYMOUTH HIGH SCHOOL

I was born on 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1940 and went to Salisbury Road Junior School. I passed the Scholarship in 1950 and went to PHS in September 1950 aged 10½. I walked to School with a friend called Jean Axon from Cranbourne Avenue, Lipson. We walked in all weathers! We never had a lift by car or bus. We had to walk up a back lane, across Freedom Fields Park, down Clifton Road, across the main road leading to Mutley Plain and into Tavistock Place and School. We had to be there by 9.am. for Registration and Assembly. We usually left home at 8.30 and arrived in the playground by 8.50. We spent some time checking our homework answers with each other. I remember a small shed where we could shelter from the rain and wind, near the entrance.

We had Assembly in the Main Hall which was also our Gymnasium. The Head Mistress, Miss Taylor, stood on the platform and the music teacher played the piano for hymns. We sat on the floor; there were no chairs. We had a Form room each year which was also our classroom; we did not move from lesson to lesson, the teachers came to us. We kept all our books in a desk. My first classroom was in the basement, my second on the first floor and my third on the second floor. I cannot remember my fourth year classroom. We had an old-fashioned, coke-heated stove in each room but they weren't used. We had large radiators filled with hot water but the rooms always felt cold. We had a blackboard and easel and the teachers wrote on it with white chalk.

Our lessons were "chalk and talk". The teacher gave us information to which we listened in silence. Then she told us to copy notes which she wrote on the board. We had textbooks which were typed in black and white. There was no colour in the books and few pictures. The Geography teacher put on the wireless occasionally and played BBC programmes. I can remember one on Yellowstone Park, which talked about Geysers and left a deep impression. We did experiments in Science with Miss Sweet, which I found interesting. We also had Mr Dunn as a Science teacher; he frightened us and used to flick chalk or board rubbers at us if we were not paying attention or rap us over the knuckles with a ruler!! Miss Hulbert taught us Domestic Science and Sewing. I can remember making apple dumplings which were delicious and vegetable soup which spilled into my basket on the way home! I took a whole Term to make a nightdress and an apron. Miss Rickard taught us Maths and she was very sympathetic and helpful. Miss Jones taught us RE; we had to learn a section of the Bible every week and write it out word perfect. She wore plaits tied up like headphones over her ears; she was very old-fashioned. Miss Rhodes taught Latin which I enjoyed. History lessons had no videos, films or filmstrips to make them interesting, but they must have left their mark because I went on to become a History teacher for 37 years! I can remember being asked to write down what it said on the Monument in Freedom Fields Park and discovered that it told how Plymouth was attacked by a Royalist force in the Civil War and withstood it, hence the name Freedom Fields Park; that was my only experience of "primary evidence". Dr Glas taught us French and she terrified most of us because if we didn't know the answer to her question, she really shouted at us and made us feel very inadequate. The only girl who always got it right was Pat Hughes; she was an excellent linguist. I recall that we would try to get Dr Glas in a good mood at the beginning of the lesson by bringing in something "foreign" to show her, eg a letter from a pen friend! Memories of English

lessons are vague but I do remember having to learn “Ozymandios, King of Kings” by Keats. We had to learn a lot of poetry by heart which I can still recall and for which I am very grateful! Art lessons I did not enjoy and was always spilling my water jar. I only ever passed one Art exam – for drawing an all over repeating pattern! I loved Gym and Games, especially hockey, which I went on to play for 40 years. Miss Garner was our Games teacher and she seemed very old to us and wore a gymslip. We had to travel to Farleys Field for hockey. We caught a bus from outside School. We had to pay for the return! In summer, we went there for athletics which I loved. I represented the School in a Plymouth and District Schools’ Sports event and won the 80 yards race and received a certificate to prove it, which I still have!

I recall having to queue up for Lunch in the Playground outside the old Dining Hall which was a detached hut. We walked around the grounds during our breaks and certain areas were out of bounds, eg behind the Domestic Science block. However, there were some metal bars across the path and one day I was tempted to do somersaults over them but I was caught by a member of Staff and given an “Order Mark”; I never did it again! Discipline was very strict. We waited outside classrooms in silence and always stood if a teacher came into the room. We walked to Assembly in silence. Punishments were “Order Marks” and “Conduct Marks”. Three Order Marks meant a detention. “R” on our homework told us the work was very poor and had to be “Redone”. The School had a high academic ethos and right from the first year I got the impression that we were all expected to pass our GCEs and go to university. Mind you, we were given the choice of studying German or Latin in our Second Year, but were told that anyone thinking of doing university had to pass her GCE Latin!

We wore navy blue gymslips with girdles, white blouses, white ankle socks and black shoes in winter, and blue and white check dresses in summer. We wore navy blue blazers and white panama hats in summer and navy raincoats and berets with PHS badge in winter. In the 4<sup>th</sup> year, we were allowed to wear navy blue skirts and we felt very grown up and thankful to be rid of gymslips.

My mother went to PHS in 1925 as a Scholarship girl; most girls were fee paying. She was never allowed to be in School photos!

## **EVERYDAY LIFE 1940 – 1956**

We travelled everywhere either on foot, on a bicycle or by bus. My family did not own a car until I was 16 years old. Only two people in our street owned a car; they were both Austin 7 models. We walked miles and miles. We walked up to the Hoe, to the Tinside swimming pool, which was probably 2½ miles. We usually caught a bus back. We walked to North Road railway station, about 2 miles and caught a train to Clearbrook station on Dartmoor. It cost 6d return. We played all day in fields, climbing trees, crossing a stream on a log and returned home on the 5 o'clock train. Sometimes we walked to St Jude's Church, ½ mile, and caught a bus to Bovisand Bay or Wembury beach where we played all day, swam, climbed rocks and returned home by bus. Occasionally we walked along Union Street to the swimming pool at Mount Wise Baths and swam there. We were usually given enough money for bus fare and one ice-cream per day. We had no watches and no mobile phones; we asked adults the time. We rarely went with any adults but in a group of children, about 6 or 8 of us. We were also taken to the beaches by our parents as a family outing in summer, and my father taught me to swim in the sea. I don't think there were any indoor pools in Plymouth during my childhood. We also played for many hours in the 3 local parks, Freedom Fields Park, Beaumont Park and Tothill Park. We loved the swings and chasing games. We chased each other around the streets on bikes. My first bike was a black "sit-up-and-beg" bike which was second hand and cost £3; I loved it and was very pleased to have it. I was later given a "butterfly" handlebar bike which was new and very fashionable. We often played in the street because we did not have gardens and it was safe because there were very few cars. In fact there was a CO-Op bread van and grocery van pulled by horses which came around our locality every week. My grandfather collected the "droppings" to put on the small vegetable patch we had in our backyard. We used to play statues, cocky fivers and fag cards; we laid cards from cigarette packets, given to us by our parents, on the doorstep and flicked others to try and cover them! Indoors, we played dressing up, Monopoly, Snakes and Ladders, Ludo and cards. We read a lot, I wrote poetry and we listened to the wireless, especially "Children's Hour" at 5pm and "Dick Barton, Special Agent" at 6.45pm. "Journey Into Space" was another favourite. As a little girl I played with my dolls and loved my battleship grey dolls' pram.

Popular music was dance band music, ballads, the beginning of rock and roll, and traditional jazz. We didn't own a record player until I was 16 but we did have an old-fashioned wind up gramophone, on which we played Gracie Fields records. It had a genuine horn and huge fat needles. The first record I ever bought was "Swinging Shepherd Blues" to play on a 1956 record player. We had no television until I was 16 but we went to the cinema on Saturday mornings for children's films. We went to see other films about once a fortnight; we loved them. I saw the original "Gone with the Wind". The first film I recall seeing was "Blue Lagoon" with Jean Simmons and Stuart Granger. We talked a lot about film stars. Hobbies were knitting, French knitting and crochet.

We only went on holiday twice when I was a child. Once we travelled to Wales to stay with an aunt. We went by train from Friary station and had a taxi which was a great luxury. We went to London to stay with an uncle and visited Chessington Zoo and "The Festival of Britain" in 1951 in Battersea Park. I remember we would

boast about how many times we had been to London – it seemed like going to the Moon!

I didn't have a boyfriend until I was 17. We played with boys as platonic friends. We never discussed sexual activity and I knew nothing about it until we had a talk at School when I was 16.