

# Gladys' Story

Told by Gladys in 2021

recorded by

*Liz Porter and*

*Annette Tomarken*

Gladys Crowhurst (nee Burr) is a long time Lenham resident who was born in 1930 in the village of Staplehurst near Maidstone. Recently, we met up with her to ask about her childhood experiences of WWII. At the age of 6 the family moved to Linton Park where her father worked, during the war years. Gladys' father grew the family's vegetables in the garden of their cottage. All water came from the pump, and the toilet was in an outhouse.

As it turned out, her memories included stories about her father, Tom Burr, who served in WWI, and of her late husband Ron, who served in WWII. Tom Burr, Gladys' father, was very good with animals, and had been with the Royal Engineers in WWI, working chiefly with the horses. His talent with horses had been spotted when Tom was on the ship en route for France. He noticed that the animals were getting injured because they were not properly tethered and were falling against the sides and the railings between them. The vet was called, Tom's assessment verified, and he became the 'horse expert' from then on. At the front, he would take horses through the trenches at night distributing supplies and food to the troops. Often he heard the boys crying, longing for their mothers.

Two of Tom's brothers lost their lives in WW I.

Gladys' husband, Ron Crowhurst, was in the Royal Artillery in WW II.

Gladys began by remembering the old battery radio ( image courtesy of

<https://collection.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk>)

on which she and her family heard the now-famous

September 3, 1939 announcement by Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain

that their country was now at war with Germany. Her father immediately began giving the children instructions about what to do in an air raid. The key was to hide under trees if



they heard planes approaching. When the war first started, the village had no sirens or warning signals, so the children were told to be alert and watchful at all times.

### **Enemy aircraft about**

On one occasion early on in the war the children saw a large number of German planes flying overhead en route for London - "the sky was black with planes", Gladys said. As time went by the enemy planes grew bolder, flying at night as well as by day. No wonder the children were frightened and "didn't have very good nights".

Their local primary school teacher was a lovely lady called Miss Thatcher. Their headteacher, Miss Pearce, lived in the cottage next door to the school. If the siren announced a raid and they started to hear the rat-a-tat of gunfire, the children would go to shelter in her cellar. On some days it felt as though they spent more time inside than out. That summer was very hot, making it even harder to sleep. Sometimes the children slept under the kitchen table, which was cooler and meant they did not have to move if there was a raid in the middle of the night. They also had a shelter dug out of the bank, but hated going there as it was dark, damp-smelling, and home to rats.

### **A gas mask for a baby**

Gladys told a touching story about the wartime gas masks distributed for people to wear during raids. Special masks for babies were also provided, but Gladys' mother refused a mask for her little girl, born during the war: "If I am killed and the baby survives, who is going to look after her?", she declared.

Army vehicles were stationed in the grounds of Linton Park, home of the Cornwallis family but requisitioned by the army during the war. As yet there were no Jeeps about, for the Americans had not joined the war. But many army vehicles sheltered among the trees in the estate park, and there were planes up at the small airfield at Detling. The tanks of petrol stored up at Detling were guarded by soldiers. One was her brother, Norman, and another her uncle.

### **Attack on Detling Airfield**

Norman, who always wanted to join the forces, had sadly lost an eye in an accident before he was old enough to join. He had to do a target shooting exercise to prove he was fit enough and because he got 5 bulls eyes out of 5, he was allowed to join up. On August 13<sup>th</sup> 1940, he turned up at the house, having cycled from Detling to Linton, to see the family and to let them know he was based at Detling aerodrome. Gladys was at home and remembered seeing him come. While he was at the house they heard a bombing raid and realised it was coming from the Detling area he quickly got back on his bike to go back there.

He found devastation, it had been bombed left right and centre, 67 personnel were killed and 94 injured Her uncle was safe and naturally her brother but a lot of people were killed. The RAF and WRAF were in the process of building huts to replace the tents where they had been sleeping. There had been no warning. The Luftwaffe thought it was a base for fighter planes, but our planes only occasionally stopped there to refuel. Nobody thought Detling was a target.



Image: <https://www.tracesofwar.com/sights/19412/Memorial-RAF-base-Detling.htm>

### **Working on the land**

Later that summer, people from Maidstone came to help pick the hops at Linton. One day a hop-picker learned that her house and family had all been destroyed while she was working in the hop garden. Even when retelling this story so many decades later, Gladys had to block her ears to shut out the memory of the bereaved mother's screams.

A number of land girls worked at the farm as well. One day a young worker was walking home past their house in Linton when suddenly, the siren went off to warn of an air raid, she had forgotten to take off the white clothes she wore for milking. She survived only by

hiding in the ditch, remembering the warning never to be visible to enemy planes. Gladys's father went out to see how she was and found her still in the ditch shaking and frightened and lucky to be alive. This rule about no lights visible applied at night, of course, and the Burrs knew never to leave a crack of light visible to the guards who watched from the church tower for any tell-tale trace of light.



VE-Day eventually came, and everyone spent a noisy night celebrating near the estate park.