

Memories of Wartime Schooldays

Carefree days while war raged

FORMER Donington Cowley Secondary School and Crow-land St Guthlac High School teacher Miss Avis Day has recaptured her childhood memories when she lived in Spalding's Halmergate and spent her happiest school days at Westlode Street School, Spalding, in the early part of the war. Miss Day now lives in Hinckley, Leicestershire.

January 1940 - Britain was in die grip of one of its most severe winters.

With flickering candle flames people struggled to unblock frozen

Rationing had been introduced on the eighth of that month but many were finding the fight against the elements more stressful than the war, which still seemed remote and unreal.

It was the prelude to a series of hard winters. As a small child, I loved it. They enhanced the always fascinating half-mile walk to school.

We lived on the corner of Halmergate, which could then be described as being on the outskirts of Spalding town and the surrounding countryside.

The Culpin family farmed a large market garden on the opposite corner and from our bedroom windows we had the view of Wellband's extensive arable field - a mass of gold at harvest times when the corn stretched out to the distant horizon.

Unmetalled Albert Street was little more than a wide farm track. The residents, in substantial houses, didn't seem to mind.

Only Mr Sadd, the local taxi driver, ran a car. When holes in the road got too deep he filled them in with broken bricks.

His luxurious He-war limousine could cope with the rough surface.

Walking to school as an infant, in the protective care of an older brother, I found the street a constant source of excitement. A vast playground.

There were puddles to jump, puddles to paddle in, puddles to kick water at one another from and puddles in which to design simple drainage schemes.

We turned off into the little passage of Willow Row Walk. Mrs Inkley, an elderly recluse, lived on this corner.

Her large garden was surrounded by a high, corrugated iron fence, above which, only just visi-

ble, it was possible to see the gnarled tops of the various fruit trees that grew there and spot the bantams roosting in the branches.

We used to enjoy the noise our sticks made as we ran them along the bumpy iron but we stopped this activity when we made friends with her.

Impressed by my brother's gentlemanly manners when he opened a gate for her and helped her with a bag of com, she invited us into the secret garden.

It was wild and overgrown. We fed the chickens and played among the tangled brush.

After this she often gave us precious eggs and we smuggled stale bread tinner for her chickens. Later there was fruit for pies.

Willow Row Walk ran parallel with the rest of Albert Street and Osier Road, also unmetalled.

The woodyard at the end was all that remained of the once flourishing basket-making industry there, which had given such pretty names to such unimposing pathways.

At this junction Mrs Gaunt kept a small general stores and we considered that we had reached civilisation.

Marine Road was a proper road bounded by a proper pad). Here we quickened our pace and felt for the penny in our pockets.

The delicious smell of freshly baking bread was already filling our nostrils.

At the large back gates of the Vine Inn we broke into a run until we reached Seaton's bake house at the end of the street.

The bulk of die baking had been completed hours beforehand but the penny loaves had just been taken from the old deep brick ovens.

Contentedly munching the warm, crusty bread we crossed the River Welland by the quaint little

Its official name was Albert Bridge, after the Prince Consort, but everyone called it Chain bridge after the one it had replaced in 1844.

This had been suspended on chains and swung open to allow the passage of the few masted ships, which still used the remaining wharves of the ancient port of Spalding.

The Albert Bridge could also be opened to accommodate the grain barges that used the river.

This was the job of the nearby blacksmith who worked in the forge next to the fish and chip shop.

This 'chippy' was so popular that large queues would form there long before it opened.

Customers had to supply their own paper:

Paper was so scarce that it was common for the customers to salvage the discarded, greasy paper which had been thrown into the gutters by earlier customers; at least there was no litter problem!

The murky waters of the Welland, bounded by thick, grey green mud left by the tide, held no attraction for us.

Nor did the mud beaten path leading to the fire station beside it. This was used by the older children.

Until the Glead County Secondary Schools opened in 1942 the pupils attended die Westlode Street School up to the age of 14.

We found them rather intimidating. Besides I wanted to see the cats in Mrs Jennings' shop window.

Mrs Jennings, an educated eccentric, sold tobacco, old clothes and second-hand books.

She adored cats. The dark, dusty Dickensian interior of the shop reeked of them.

Sometimes my mother took me in there after school. Apart from the cats I was attracted by a yellow slicker advertising Fyffes bananas - my only knowledge of such a fruit.

The packet of 20 Players Navy Cut my mother bought was also quite rare.

Mrs Sparks's was another interesting shop. The front room of a small terraced cottage, next door to Mr Scoins' cycle shop, she was the school tuck shop.

When Mrs Sparks wasn't serving she would sit by the window in a comfy armchair.

We bought fizzy bottles of red pop for a penny. Sometimes we were wealthy enough to buy sherbert or even aniseed balls.

Strange to think that this carefree period was the time in which Britain was fighting for her very survival.