

A SUFFOLK MAWTHER'S CHILDHOOD 1929-1945

More WW2 tales from Viv Mason's memory-bank. This month she writes of

Shrapnel, Elbow-Grease and Food Rationing.

I was getting quite a collection of shrapnel. Some with the most vicious edges that could have taken one's head off with ease. A stick of bombs fell on Cretingham one overcast day, killed a horse and damaged some cottages. I had been standing on our side lawn listening to the slow drone overhead and called out to Mother to come and listen. She arrived with broom in hand. I said, "That's a Jerry all right", snatched the broom, aimed the handle heavenwards, said "Bang, bang, bang, that'll fetch you down". The reply from above was immediate. A shrill whistle, followed by an almighty crump. Then another, and another. My Mother and I threw ourselves flat on the ground as this stick of bombs seemed to be coming our way. Then all was quiet, the engine drone faded away and my Mother said, "That was all your fault."

I got on my bike, went to see what had happened and came back with more odds and ends to add to my collection.

When I was accepted into Miss Baldry's Cookery Class I had visions of making delectable dishes to take home to eke out our ~~meat~~ rations but the Domestic Science Centre, as it was proudly called, was as severely rationed as we were at home. I loved every minute of Thursday mornings, learning how to clean and service an oil oven together with a coal range which was vast and rather like cooking on a steam engine. There, fiery coals to be kept going, hot water boiler never to be neglected, and a range of "tools" to be burnished and shone, and use to poke, pull and push various parts in, out and up.

One day, when we were asked to spring clean, twenty of us donned little white pleated aprons and white caps (perks of the job) and Cissie Barrett and I were told to wash down one gloss-painted wall and its window sills with soap and hot water. Half way through, seeing a rival pair making more progress than we were, I sent Cissie off to Miss Baldry (stock taking in a vast pantry) for some ELBOW GREASE. Cissie ambled into the pantry, and was propelled out of it a darned sight faster by Miss Baldry, stopped in mid-sultana count.

There was quite a rumpus, Cissie protesting that Vivien Jones had sent her for it etc. etc. The interlude took some of the boredom out of the task.

Barter came into some of our food deals and we would swap our sliver of cheese for a spoonful of sugar, so to speak. My Mother enjoyed her highly illegal butter-run, which coincided with the issue of the 'Chutch' magazine. She went round delivering copies covering quite a milage on her bike. I was still churning for a few farmers' wives and for someone along the Roman Road. My Mother would load up her bicycle basket with the butter-pat wrapped in a magazine. Then pile all the other magazines on top, flat and normal looking, and set off. At one regular stop for a cup of tea, she'd leave her bike leaning in the porch, where a large plaque proclaimed for all to see "East Suffolk County Constabulary". I used to worry that her "Dragonfly" would fall over, that out would roll the contents of her basket, and she'd land in serious trouble, but she never worried.

By handing in our bacon coupons we were allowed to keep a pig. This was all very well but keeping only one pig meant we came on intimate terms with it, so eating it was impossible. The solution was found when we met up with someone prepared to swap pigs at killing time.

The 'Hins' were another problem. There was a very small ration for chicken meal and we had to boil up all vegetable peelings, greens and anything we could lay our hands on to help eke it out. Father arrived off duty one night to find a note, "Gone to Warships Week meeting at Earl Soham. Food on stove. Doll".

I came sailing in, hungry as usual. Father took up two vast soup plates and ladled up marvellous hash, the like of which we had never tasted before. When Mother came in she lifted the lid off a cauldron and said "What's wrong with you two then, aren't you hungry? The pot's still full."

She was peering into the depths of a rich brown stew, with pearl barley as a thickener.

"Oh! We didn't have that - we had the other one" said Father. Then the truth dawned. We'd eaten the "hins" food being cooked up ready for their morning Wakey Wakey and "please lay today" regime. Now what?

"Well, something for sure" said Mother. "The 'hins' are not having rich stew, with pearl barley, so you two had better see about laying some eggs!"

