

Bombs, Blackout Undies and Canal Roach in the 1940s.

By Roy Webster.

Henrietta was a perfect example of a village tomboy, always eager to mix with the lads during their fishing expeditions on the canal not to mention a few other nefarious activities such as scrumping apples during their summer school holidays when the war's DOUBLE BRITISH SUMMER TIME extended daylight hours to almost midnight. During the summers of the early 1940's when the school holiday seemed very slowly to be running towards the autumn term while the height of THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN raged in the skies, it seemed an age for worried mothers before their wayward almost feral juveniles would be back at their school desks in the Dilham village primary.

Many of the overstretched mums whose spouses were away fighting the nation's enemies were most concerned by the threat of stray bombs being dumped in the countryside by German bombers returning to their home bases at full throttle for fear of being downed by our world famous force of spitfires and hurricanes.

Already a battered old oak in the Village street, whose gnarled trunk and extending branches were still bearing the unmistakable scars of flying shrapnel, was regarded as a stark warning to rural families.

The blast of hot metal piercing the ancient timber came from one of four high explosive bombs dropped by a lone Luftwaffe night raider which had gouged out three deep craters in the fields and one in the road leading to the Dilham Primary School, It was rumoured by some of the villagers that a careless citizen had shown a light through the compulsory blackout by opening a door. But by some inexplicable miracle the bombs fell almost exactly midway between the two main residential areas of the village and no more than 800 yards from a direct hit on the Boy Roy's house.

That morning the school head mistress, affectionately known as "Old Gosh" by her pupils, had to round up her eldest pupils who were more interested in surveying the damage and collecting the still warm jagged metallic souvenirs than practicing their times tables and English spelling.

However, on this particular hazy, lazy early day of summer enemy aircraft and school were far from the mind of Henrietta, who now was more intent on beating the lads at their own game as she cast and recast her worm baited hook into the crystal clear water. The keen eight-year-old lass felt certain of success, for she had commandeered one of the most promising fishing spots on the canal, just a few hundred yards from her home where she had spotted a brace of huge red finned fish, roach or rudd, surface feeding the previous evening.

The Boy Roy and his three primary school pals Nipper, Daggie and Curly were hidden from her view while casting their lines below the ancient brickwork of the ancient Tonnage Bridge, fishing opposite the Army searchlight and the sleek anti-aircraft gun, whose sinister black barrel tapered reassuringly skyward in the shimmering midday sunlight.

A corporal and three Army privates clattered into view riding a bren gun carrier; their duty to prepare the breech of the bridge Ack Ack gun for shells and be ready to open fire if and when the Luftwaffe crossed the North Sea coastal defences to target local airfields and important industrial conurbations such as Norwich and Gt Yarmouth or worse, even launch a paratroop led invasion.

But on this day the sky was quiet beyond a solitary low flying Lysander monoplane, probably transporting a brave Special Operations Executive volunteer into Occupied Europe to meet with other agents to acquire and report Nazi military operation plans.

Thus, the four youngsters were becoming increasingly bored. None of them had been rewarded by as much as a single bite from fish that had become sluggish in the crystal clear Canal, temporarily chilled by low overnight temperatures.

The lads had already given up trying. One, who had been swigging from a bottle all day, was leaning on the brickwork, surreptitiously recycling the once fizzy dandelion and burdock Corona trickling into the water.

He was concealed from the girl's view beneath the mossy masonry of the humpback bridge, built more than a century earlier as a right of way to convey horse-drawn traffic and pedestrians across the North Walsham/Dilham Canal.

Henrietta had also lost patience with the fish and, leaving her baited fishing hook unattended in the water, she joined the lads who had been secretly peering at her vain efforts from the high parapet of the bridge wall.

“My mum has made me some woolly panties to keep me warm in cold weather. Want to see?” she enquired innocently. And with no more ado, she hoisted her skirts to reveal a dark maroon undergarment, skilfully stitched together from the remnants of blackout material.

The lads, dumbstruck and in embarrassing discomfort, shuffled their feet. Henrietta broke the silence. “OK, I’ve shown you mine, now show me yours,” she commanded, as her clothes were falling back into place.

Those were the days when braces and buttons, rather than belts and buckles held things together. So which lad would display the courage to meet this awkward, time-honoured challenge?

It was the moment that Mother Nature intervened and came to their rescue “Hen! Hen! Your float! Your float! It is bobbing like mad,” yelled The Boy Roy, Henrietta’s favourite friend of the moment.

An instant response sent her plunging into a feet first athletic skid down the bank, managing to clutch hold of her fishing rod just as the float disappeared beneath the surface. It was tugged by an unseen force into the deep channel newly carved out by an Army excavator during one of the most worrying period of the war to form a natural tank trap in the event of an enemy invasion supported by divisions of the lethal Nazi Panzers.

So what was this fish that had relieved the lads of an embarrassing challenge? Suddenly, a magnificent roach rolled lazily and well beaten on the surface; deep silver of flank, red of eye and faultless fins without a single scale out of place.

Henrietta heaved her prize ashore. “My mum will want to cook this, I’ll tell you what it weighed tomorrow,” she promised.

On the kitchen scales this mighty specimen registered 3lb 3oz. Never before had a bigger example of its kind been reported from the canal and most certainly not since - the closest coming in at 3lb 1oz for local pensioner Ted Howard in the 1950s.

“Mum filleted the fish and fried it in beef dripping; we had it for tea,” revealed Henrietta next day.. “It was a treat. Shall we have another go on Saturday, then you lot can show me yours?” she giggled mischievously.

Henrietta waited on the bridge in vain for the lads who failed to show up. Cricket stumps were up on the playing field and, with the home guard erecting goal posts to host friendly inter village games for all ages, Canal fishing by the lads would not resume for another nine months by which time Henrietta would have forgotten what she wanted them to reveal although she now possessed a Box Brownie black and white of her record Canal roach.

However, the memory of viewing that magnificent North Walsham and Dilham Canal fish, not to mention the startling vision of those blackout red flannel bloomers would remain in the mind’s eye of The Boy Roy for the next 78 years at least. In fact Old Father Time would forever deny him a repeat of both those fascinating visual real life pleasures!

Picture - Roy on a May bank holiday evening watching the roach and rudd rising at Ebridge.

