

John Thomas remembers.....

My First Jobs



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The bottom of Unicorn Hill. Jack Davies' Butcher's shop would be on the right

Image: GHC-1310.jpg from the rlhd archives

After school I went back at four thirty and sometimes worked on 'till half past nine at night. I had to scrub the big wooden chopping block with sawdust and boiling water but occasionally I got two links of sausages to take home for my tea when he had had a good day.

Jack was a good boss, he paid me a pound a week, and he wanted me to stay and work for him, even asking me not to go in the Navy. But I wanted to see the world and, to be honest, move out of Edward Street, so I left school at fourteen and went straight in the Navy and went for my training at HMS Ganges.

So my wages, two bob from the butchers and a bob from the papers, making three bob weekly. A bob being five pence in today's value, making a total of three bob weekly, about fifty hours. I loved School life and even got called back to the school when I was in the services and that gave me a lot of pride to go back and speak to the kids about my life since I was at their school. I used to sing them sailors songs making sure they were the ones suitable for young children.

I reached adulthood at the ripe old age of eight years when I was promptly informed I was to be transferred to the big boys school, Bridge Street juniors. So now I had become a junior instead of an infant. On arriving home after my first day in a new world --- as it were, my father informed me I should now look round for employment - there being plenty of arduous jobs out there, such as paper boys, butcher's boys etc. In those days there being no age restrictions as when one should start earning a living my father reminding me he began work aged 6, stacking the newly made bricks.

When I was ten my father had got me my first job delivering Sunday newspapers. Mike and Jack Abbot were my paper bosses. Then when I was about thirteen or fourteen I worked for six months part time for Jack Davies, the Butcher, delivering meat. His shop was down by the station, I think it's now the Tandoori restaurant opposite the bus station. Next door was Sandilands and as far as I can remember it was the Prudential Insurance Company. Delivering the meat I met lots and lots of people, I was on one of those bike with a little front wheel and a basket.

It was a hard job, I began at six thirty in the morning getting the meat out of the fridge before it was cut up to make the orders. I went off to school during the day but popped back at lunchtime to deliver any urgent orders



John Thomas

A traditional delivery bicycle like John rode.

Image: JT-136.jpg

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1940 And The War Comes To Redditch

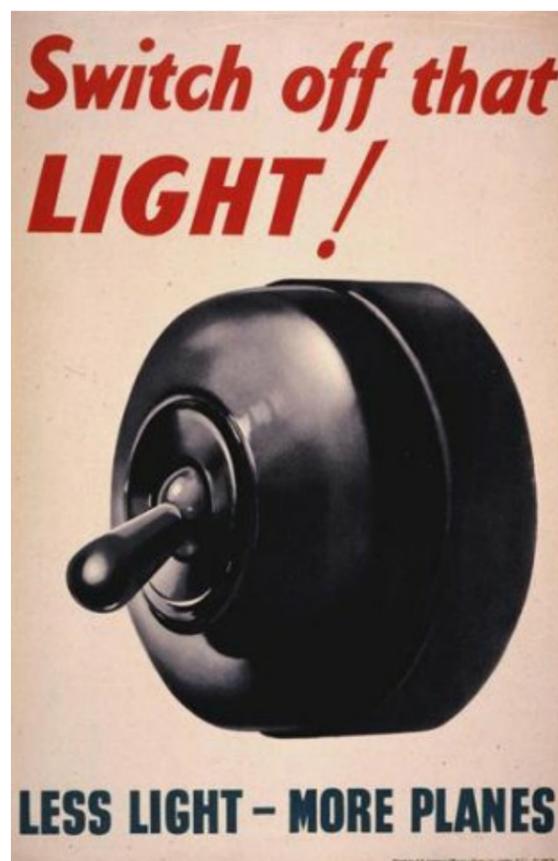


Image: JT-131.jpg

Four kids and no income we soon became poverty stricken, alas I said goodbye to my weekly earning, I had to contribute to the house.

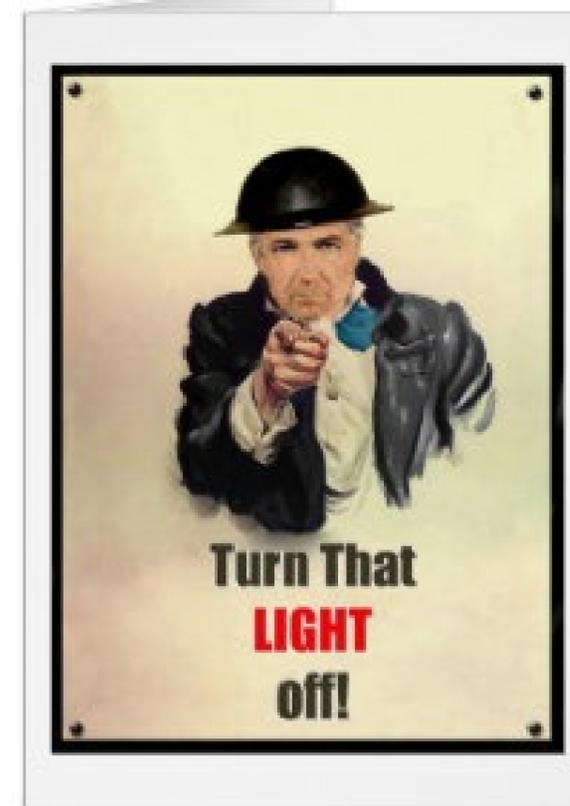
Back to the blackout, a certain person named Clark, was appointed blackout warden for our area, he duly knocked on our door one night during the darkness hours to inform Mother he had observed a chink of light could be seen from outside and she was told the ten bob fine would be forthcoming, I should add we had eaten two slices of bread and lard that day as that was the only food available for us. I doubt that Mum had eaten anything.

I can still envisage his evil smile of delight as Mother with tears in her eyes pleaded with him not to report us but we were duly fined. After great effort by the family, even Cora knocked peoples doors to sweep peoples paths for halfpenny, Mother taking on extra cleaning jobs despite being crippled with arthritis, we managed the ten bob.

The year now was 1940, a year of war, blackouts, food rationing etc. I recall a very nasty incident that occurred this point in time.

Government imposed regulations that required complete blackout, no lights should be seen from outside the houses that may induce German planes to unload in your direction. Wardens used to look for any lights showing from your direction, anyone infringing these regulations, a fine of ten bob, would be imposed on any offender, a princely sum in any ones eyes (50p)

I should explain by this time my father had ventured out into the wide world to seek out any earthly pleasures and delights that may be elsewhere having sired four children, the oldest being Audry, followed by my brother Ralph, myself and last but not least my young sister Cora, so named for the coronation of King George IV that being 1936.



John Thomas remembers.....



1942 And Spud Picking And The Bombings



The depiction of the Mount Street Bombing

Image: Norman Neason taken from Anne Bradford's Book "Old Redditch Voices"

Mount Street, killing a number of people.

We rushed up to see what we could scrounge. I remember finding a tin of pears, damaged but still in one piece, so we had a feast that night without a thought of the poor souls who had lost their lives and all the others left homeless.

The war years, 1939-1045 were hard, life seemed to be for those that had and for those that had not, no in-between. The very rich and the very poor, my family being of the latter, on reflection, we were used to not having enough so it didn't come to harm money can buy most things so the rich didn't go short.

Every half year mother received a poor voucher from a charity called "The Toc H", for second hand clothes donated by the rich I remember being bestowed a pair of short grey trousers and on my first day of wearing them I climbed and would you believe I tore them from Ar----- to breakfast time so to speak. Poor mother was beside herself, having thrown my old trousers away but to send me to school in a pair of her bloomers (knickers), pantaloons as they were then called. I was so ashamed, it was a long time before I climbed another conker tree.

At this point I would like to say, during my years with my wife Hazel we had little money, but we had each other's love and all the money in the world couldn't buy the love and life we shared together.

The year was 1942, war raging I had already reached the old age of ten, spud picking was then on the agenda (Automation hadn't been born). Farmer Wright who owned most potato fields, most grown-ups of the time were engaged in war work, leaving the menial jobs to kids, men from 18 years to 40, were called up for military service, so wasters like myself were available for spud picking, apple picking and other jobs, we called it slave labour you could earn about a tanner for eight hours back breaking work, working in twos, one to hold open the sacks, one to put the spuds in and then we would change round every so often. A two and a tanner reward was awarded to the pair who filled the most bags at the end of the day.

Now thereby hangs a tail, we never once got a look in for the reward, not because we were lazy, there just happened to be two sisters Ivy and Valerie Greenfield, who scooped the top prize every pick they used to go off, then at the end of the day then return with loads of sacks of spuds. So one day I decided to follow them, keeping out of sight and guess what! There they were with several bags of spuds and several farm hands (those who worked on the farm), in an orderly queue I knew how they managed the daily half-crown, do I need to describe how?

1943, was the year of the bombs, Hitler must have decided Redditch had got away without a scratch, so he sent his planes to bomb the B.S.A., their production was guns and motor cycles (for military use) turned out to be a near miss but they did hit a dozen houses in

it



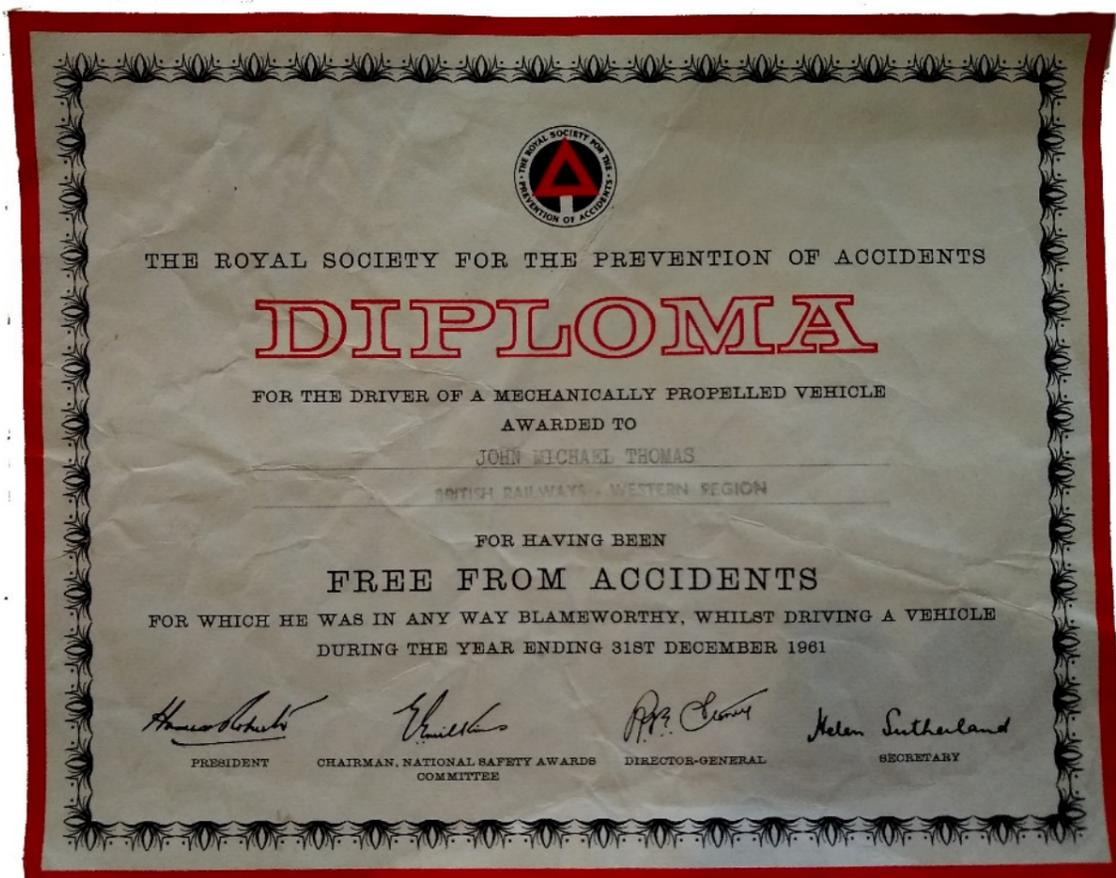
The BSA Factory on Studley Road

Image: From the RLHS Archives

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1960 And Back Home From The Sea



An unexpected Reward

Image: JT-130.jpg

instrument mechanic. I think it cost me six pounds for the ten lesson course. I was initially a trainee but by going to college, and I did not tell them I was, I got on well using the knowledge I was getting at night school to show I was a quick learner. Anyway I did well and eventually became a Charge Hand.

My job entailed going in the furnaces to check the temperature band fan speeds etc. because they were asbestos lined it gave me asbestosis, Nathalie, so I eventually had to retire through ill-health. I have lived longer than they expected and still have to take medication today.

But at the Alloys I eventually worked in the labs, got more money and so bought another house, 35 Edmond Close, and our standard of living continued to rise.

When I left the Navy I wanted to get myself a career so I moved to London to join the Police force. With my Navy background I actually moved onto the Thames Police driving the skimmer boats. I even drove a boat for the Duke of Edinburgh. But my father got ill with a bad ticker so I came back to Redditch to live. I found it hard to get a job as I did not really want to work in a factory but I eventually got a job as a delivery driver for British Railways. I had learned to drive in the Navy, passing my driving test and being a Chauffeur in Rome for a while. At British Rail I was driving Foden, Scammell and other artics' based in the railway yards in Redditch.

During this time I got married. I was earning 164 shillings a week, we had a council house, in Kingsley Avenue in the prefab bungalows and when they knocked some of those down we took a house on the Abbeydale Estate. I was lucky that whilst there the government gave tenants the right to buy their house so I bought mine for six thousand pounds. I sold it and moved a few years later making a good profit enabling me to buy a better house and a car.

Over this period I also decided once again I needed to do something with my life and get on and so I got myself a job at High Duty Alloys delivering parts and once again got to know load of people. It was not a good job but I cheated a little bit and pretended I knew more that I did and had to quickly read up on things.

I also went to college in the evenings, it was in Easmore Road then, and I learned to be an



John Thomas

Once a familiar sight on British Roads

Image: JT-126.jpg

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Getting On And Moving Up At The Alloys



The Walter Somers Forge in Halesowen

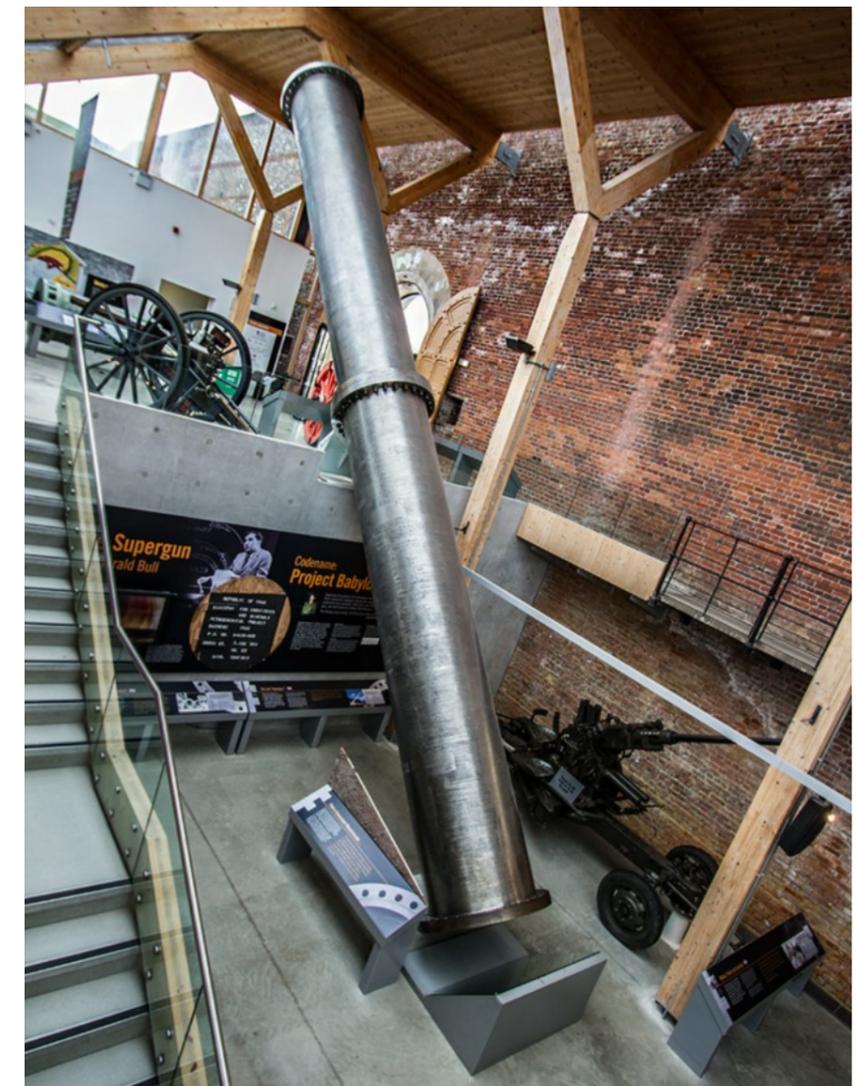
Image: JT-112.jpg

My job at HDA eventually became a bit of a “roving commission” so I was really my own boss as long as I did a set amount of work a day. There was one job I did which helped me enormously. I was asked one day by the boss, Mr Scanlon, to go over to Walter Summers in Halesowen to look at a problem. I think they had no-one else to send. You’ll remember they were making a big gun for Saddam Hussain. They were trying to heat-treat the gun barrel, one of the biggest in the world, and the furnace has gone wrong.

So I thought what could I do? I know a little but not much but I was the only one available to go. I got to the factory and all the bosses there were there saying there's a million pounds at stake and something gone wrong with the heat. I had a quick look and it suddenly clicked that the instrument was malfunctioning due to a loose connection. So I realised it was just an open circuit in the Kent instrument panel, so I took the side off and took the clutch to pieces. There was nothing wrong with it but it looked as if I knew what I was doing.

I put it all back together at the same time fixing the loose connection and then it worked perfectly.

I’m embarrassed to say it was one of the biggest deceits I have made but I was the hero of the day. They treated me to a steak at lunch time in the management canteen and they gave me a ten pound bonus. Back at the Alloys Mr Scanlon was waiting for me and I thought I had been exposed but he said Walter Summers had been very pleased with my work and wanted put more work HDA's way. When I was working at HDA we had no protective equipment and hence I now suffer from asbestosis and poor hearing, although the hearing could have been damaged by gun fire in the Navy. As a result, with our mortgage paid off my wife and I decided I should retire early. The day I went to personnel to tell them I was leaving I met someone coming out with letters to go on the notice boards asking for voluntary redundancies. So when I went in, I asked to be made redundant to the surprise of the personnel manager who had only just approved the letters to go on the notice boards. Reluctantly he accepted my name so as a result I left thirty six thousand pounds better off than I expected. This was a mixed blessing because after fifty years of marriage my wife became poorly and so we used the money to travel and enjoy our final years together.



Saddam Hussein’s Supergun

Image: JT-133.jpg

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Life in the "Old" Town



The Gaumont Cinema on Church Road

Image: 21338.jpg

We had four cinemas in Redditch in those days, "Gaumont", "Danilo", "Select" and the "Palace. Entry charges, a tanner for a box, down to a penny in the Gods. Just before the war, 1939 the admission went up to one and a tanner (one and six pence, (today's equivalent seven and a half pence) of course no self-respecting vagrant like myself could afford that vast amount of cash but we beat them by pooling our resources, making enough to admit two people. The remainder of us would be admitted through the emergency exit, which could only be opened from inside, ("we came, we saw, we conquered") If we only had enough for one ice cream we would start off with three licks per person, as it got smaller we were reduced to one lick each.

In 1942 we had a contingent of yank personnel stationed at what is now Blakenhurst prison. The yanks came into town Saturday night, scores of urchins like myself would await their arrival with trepidation looking dirty and as thin as possible we started our begging routine, ("Got any gum chum or candy handy) it worked most of the time we found they were generous to a fault. However when they vacated their transport for the girls and pubs we plundered the lorries for anything stealable, on reflection we were ungrateful wretches, we repaid their generosity by stealing from them.

Saturday nights, found us waiting for the market traders to close for the weekend. Mother used to wait at the meat stall until the meat auction finished, then for two bob she could buy a joint of beef, that would provide us with about three meals, the residue made dripping sandwiches. Just a luxury for the few with the remainder of butchers selling off the meat cheap as wouldn't keep after the weekend as fridges were for the very rich then!

Mother paid about two bob for a large joint of meat, red in parts, green in others, she always cut the green bits off before she cooked it.

Ralph and me, for our contribution would wait at the greengrocers, for them to close down for the night, turning off the paraffin lamps, a signal for us to pounce on all the waste we called it. Sped with other urchins of course grabbing what we could, we lived like Lords on Saturday night at home our next task was to cut off all the bad bits of fruit and vegetables, eating the occasional bit. Those were the days Jack Deaken was the name of the butcher who auctioned the meat, a bit of this a bit of that and a couple of sausage thrown in, for a tanner for the lot. Mr Ralph was the green-grocer. Strange I can remember names and things of yesteryear.

John Thomas



The former Danilo cinema in its final days as a cinema

Image: JT-121.jpg