

Ackleton in the Second World War by Chippine Breeze



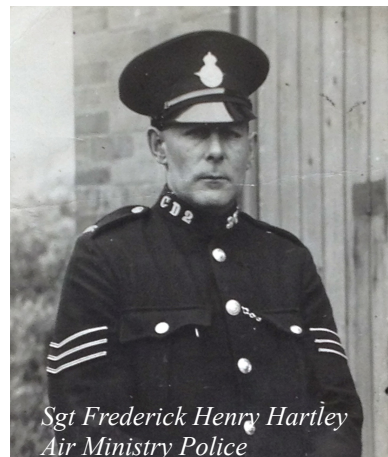
1903 Ordnance Survey map of Ackleton

Scale: 6 inches to the mile

The Hartley family moved to Ackleton in 1939 from a house in Cosford with a large garden to one of the six houses in a row facing the main street. The Ackleton house was a shock to say the least. We moved in November and I remember my mother's words when she went into the dark little cottage. She looked out at the back to a view of a pig sty and the ruin of the malthouse and said 'Harry, Harry, what have you brought me to.' Whatever my father had told mother about the cottage clearly hadn't prepared her for this. Mother came from a good family, her father was a farmer and she had been educated at a convent in Ireland and then trained as a nurse. Father's words were reassuring. 'Don't worry, Dot, this is only temporary, we will soon be moving to somewhere much nicer.' The cottage was to remain my parents' home for the rest of their lives.



Dorothy Annie Warner SRN



Sgt Frederick Henry Hartley  
Air Ministry Police

Our only modern convenience was a sink in the kitchen but there was no running water. The cottages were known as 'Tub Row' to the other villagers, because in each of the back yards was a water butt to catch the rainwater. This was used to do the washing but first had to be sieved through muslin to catch insects and debris. When the tubs were empty water had to be fetched for washing which was done in a copper boiler built into a corner of the kitchen. There was only one water pump for the six houses and when that ran dry, the pump had to be primed. This was quite a job. A bucket of water was poured down the well and people took turns to pump the water up. If their efforts failed, it was a case of carrying water from the road, about 150 yards away and down the "shut," an alleyway between two houses and the fire-damaged malthouse. Your feet can get very wet playing that game.

There were electric lights in the cottage but a hurricane lamp was needed to visit the lavatory which was in a brick shed in the back yard. No flushing toilet here, just a bucket which had to be emptied regularly and the toilet paper was newspaper squares.

Clothes were ironed with a flat iron heated over the fire and then the base covered with a tin shield. Oh, the joy of dropping soot on a newly pressed shirt. Baths were taken in a galvanised bath or in the enamelled hip bath. The water had to be heated on the fire and scooped out of the bath afterwards.

The good thing was that we were never short of food. Behind the malthouse there was a large allotment which was invaluable in the war. Father was a good gardener and supplied enough vegetables for all the family. We had our own chickens at the allotment and even today, egg and chips are always a meal for when you are hard up. There were rabbits aplenty, unaffected in those days by disease and a roast rabbit was a meal to remember. The pig kept in the sty was another source of good food. The pig and the hens were fed on tiny potatoes and vegetable peelings which were cooked in the washboiler. Harry Bray, our roadman friend, butchered the pigs. The meat was shared with other villagers and when their pig was killed you got a piece in return. The pigs were very large and yielded a lot of lard - real pork scratchings in those days. Hams and bacon were cured with saltpetre for several weeks on the large settles in the pantry and then hung, covered in butter muslin, from great hooks in the kitchen wall. Only my father was allowed to cut the ham from the bone.

Cooking was done on a range in the kitchen and what a terrible smell there was if a pan boiled over. The soot had to be cleaned from the pans each time they were used but the oven was excellent for baking and the fire was perfect for toasting bread. The Sunday evening supper of toast with dripping from the Sunday roast was an absolute delight. It never tasted so good when we had an electric cooker.

We were not allowed to do any work on Sundays but after breakfast we children dressed in our best clothes and went for a walk on the roads whilst mother prepared dinner. This was Sunday dinner with no pretension about lunch.

Our new life in Ackleton had begun and I was to move schools from Donnington (a mile down the road from our home in Cosford,) to my new school in Worfield. The journey to school couldn't have been more different from what I had been used to. In the mornings it was dark, and in the war, with Double Summer Time, it was even worse. The first morning my brother Fred and I were going to school, mother said to Fred, 'hold hands and be good' and off we went with the other Ackleton

children, down Room Bank, along the unmetalled road from the bottom of the hill to the Dudley Road, through Rowley's Farm and then over the fields. Mr Rowley disliked the children going through the farm and put cattle in the field as a deterrent. 'Be careful of those cattle,' he would shout. In winter we were soaked by rain and in summer by the dew from the crops as we walked along the narrow pathway. The crops, taller in those days, were sown across the footpath and the only track was the one which our little feet made.

I remember one morning my brother was taken by some dewdrops sparkling in the sun on quaking grass. He picked a bunch for one of the teachers but was very disappointed when he got to school with just a bunch of rather dull grass! Another morning the Acklonites, as some of the teachers called us, were tempted by the beautiful weather with the idea of taking our sandwiches down to the stream. In the end, we couldn't bring ourselves to do it and hearing the church clock chime we realised we would be late for school. My brother held my hand and we ran together until I could keep up no longer. At this point Fred left me and ran on with some of the others to make sure he would be on time, which he was. The boys who were late had to line up for the cane. 'You, too, Fred Hartley,' said Mr Knowles, the headmaster. 'But I wasn't late,' said Fred.' The reply was, 'You aren't getting the cane because you were late but because you didn't wait for your sister!'

Walking home after school we were tired and the older children would look after the little ones and sometimes give them a piggy back. When it rained hard the Worfe would flood and one day after school we reached the bridge and could see that the ground beyond it was flooded. We all held hands as we walked through the water which was lucky because suddenly there was no ground beneath my feet, only water. Had someone not been holding on to me I would have drowned. When we got home mother said, 'I suppose you came round by the road.' She was horrified when we said that we had taken our normal route. It is amazing to think that the teachers, knowing that there were floods, hadn't offered us any advice at least.

Sydney Knowles, the headmaster, taught all the children to write properly. There were no biros then but nib pens and inkwells. I used to get ink all up my right forefinger. There were six classes at Worfield School. Miss Thomas taught the youngest, the five year olds, and in her classroom was a big doll's house. We knitted rugs and bedcovers and learned other basic skills.

In the next class Mrs Brudenell taught us to embroider. A group of girls embroidered a tablecloth for a local lady. When Mrs Brudenell went to tea at the house she mentioned that the cloth was upside down. The reply was what every embroiderer wants to hear, 'I can't tell which side is which.' I remember the cloth so well because I worked on it and when it was finished the lady brought a bag of carefully saved sweets for the girls who had done the embroidery. Unfortunately I was away from school on the day the sweets were handed out and none of the others saved me any. We also collected sheep wool and made it into a rug on a loom.

Big girls were taught to cook and to clean a house properly and the boys did woodwork and gardening. In the summer we had some lessons outside. We would sit in a big circle on our chairs in the playground and take turns to read. We had nature walks and outdoor painting lessons. The school leaving age was fourteen when I went to Worfield and then went up to fifteen. There were scholarships to Bridgnorth Grammar School. We scholarship people were very looked down upon in the early years but when it was necessary for everyone to pass an examination to attend, the snobbery ceased.

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One day someone came to school to warn us of the dangers of incendiary bombs. The reason for the visit was that they had been dropped in the Rowley woods area. We were told to be careful and not touch any if we saw them. Inevitably, after this we went round looking for bombs but never found any.

Ackleton in the war was much smaller than it is now. There were, and still are, several big houses in Ackleton. In 1939, Miss Mabel Wainwright had left Tyte Farm following the death of her mother and was living at The Laurels and Mr Neale had bought the farm. At Ackleton House were the Beddows family. Colonel Beddows was a Wolverhampton timber merchant. At the end of World War II, his son Ian was the youngest colonel in the British army. The Hickmans lived at The Manor and Major Hickman was also a timber merchant. The Harpers lived at Rosemount where there is now a housing development of that name. Mr Harper's land was used as a market garden although by trade he was a bookie based in Wolverhampton. Mr Harper owned a horse called Grock and a large, ill-tempered billy goat who chased me and who had a taste for my mother's washing when it was on the line. Miss 'Gertie' Matthews ran the Red Cow public house. She used to drive out in her pony and trap with a big Alsatian dog for company. Mr Farrier farmed Ackleton Hall Farm and supplied milk twice daily to the big houses close by. Cottages had a morning delivery but more could be collected from the farm in the afternoon. At the other end of the village, considered to be Ackleton but actually Stableford, Mr Henry Bath, a director of Sunbeam lived at the Folley, and rented Folley Farm to Mr Rowley. Mr Bath taught at the Sunday School for several years. The maltings and many of the cottages were owned by Mr Nock who lived in the Bilston area.



In 1939 there were two malthouses on the hill at Ackleton, an old malthouse which had burnt down in 1935 and was just a shell afterwards and a new malthouse which was saved from the fire. The latter would be a landmark for miles around for another two decades until it was demolished to make way for a new housing development. The consequence of the fire, started I believe by a cigarette carelessly dropped on some straw, was that Mr Nock's capital literally went up in smoke

and the malthouses remained as they were after the fire. There was no money to clear the ruins of the old malthouse which became a playground where we children would happily play despite threats from anxious parents. The new malthouse, however, was destined to play an important role in the war and one which is now forgotten.

As far as I know there was no warning that the men were coming. They arrived one day, soldiers returning from the Battle of Dunkirk, and many, including one prisoner of war, were billeted in the new malthouse. Others were billeted in houses throughout the village as temporary accommodation. We had eight soldiers in our house. One morning my father arrived home after a night shift with the air ministry police at Cosford, to find a stranger shaving in our kitchen. 'Who are you,' said the stranger. Father replied, 'more to the point, who the hell are you.' After a while more permanent living quarters were sorted out. Nissen huts were erected in the field next to the telegraph exchange and the telephone box and the field became known as Soldiers' Field. How they arrived in Ackleton I don't know. Perhaps they came by train to Albrighton or Bridgnorth and then walked, or were brought by vehicles. The women of the village ran a canteen for the soldiers in part of the old malthouse which was still standing, an area with a lovely tiled floor. I can only suppose that the army supplied the food, but the women of Ackleton made sandwiches and baked cakes. For us children all this activity was very exciting. The soldiers trained by marching up and down the road and I remember sitting on our doorstep watching them. The fuschia bush was in bloom and I kept popping the buds until mother caught me and stopped my fun.

I said there was one prisoner of war in Ackleton. Why he was there I don't know. He was housed in a room above a reservoir in the malthouse. One day he walked across the loading bay going towards the main building and fell through a trap door. He fell a great height and broke his ankle.

There were German and Italian prisoners of war in Worfield and they came to work on the farms. On Mr Neale's farm in Ackleton there were three German POWs, Helmut, Billy and Dieter. One was a fisherman by trade, one a farm boy far from home and the third was one of the ruling classes, a fact he liked you to know.

Another group of strangers were the evacuees. A girls school was evacuated to Worfield and the children went to the village school. I remember a girl called Sadie teaching us to sing 'The White Cliffs of Dover.' At home we also had evacuees for part of the war as did most of the other villagers. I don't know how my mother managed. They, a mother and two sons used the big front room and the bedroom above. That left one medium and one small bedroom for my parents, brother, small sister and me. (My youngest sister didn't arrive until 1941.) We lived in the kitchen with the range for cooking and boiler for washing. Between washes the boiler was covered with a lid and a cloth and usually a pile of books. If we had an unexpected visitor, mother would shove everything into the copper and put the lid on. Two or three clear surfaces and a room looks tidy.

There were always books. Dad's mother said that we were all pen and paper at our house, covered in ink or with our noses into books. Dad worked shifts and often in the long winter evenings mother would tell us stories and teach us poetry. There was an ongoing tale of Pommy Larndus. We never knew if she invented him. We also made rag rugs, played cards and darts and mother made our clothes. I remember making a fireside rag rug which we raffled to get money to help pay for the party to celebrate the end of the war. It was won by Mrs Farrier at the farm and I saw it years later still in use in her parlour.

I was the first girl in our village to wear wartime clogs. Shoes were on coupons, clogs were not. Marian and Molly Brown went home laughing their heads off about mine but their mother said, 'I'm glad you find them funny, yours are in the cupboard.' We soon learned to pad the toes and play ballerinas. My baby sister was too young for clogs but she later became a ballerina, married a GI and went to live in America.

There were infrequent church services in the Recreation Room at Ackleton. The building was given by Mrs Morrison as an offering of thanks for the birth of her grand daughter. In the room was an altar at one end which was screened off during the week. At the opposite end of the room there was a stage and between the two was a dance floor. Whist drives and dances were held and there was a youth club in the 1940s and '50s with exchange visits with Beckbury Youth Club.

The Parish Church was Worfield and after the war there was a coach once a month to take us to Evensong. The coach would be packed with people. Ackleton people have often worshipped at Badger Church which was much nearer home and I recall walking through the Dingle with parents and friends to take my sister to be christened there in 1941. In those days the Rector was the Rev. Archibald Dix and his wife came regularly to visit the people of Ackleton. She had an ear trumpet as she was rather deaf. Her eldest daughter Margaret was in London training to be a medical missionary but after training to be a surgeon was very badly injured in the Blitz. Margaret Dix went on to become world famous for her research into hearing and balance. Her younger sister, Imogen, taught the Sunday School at Ackleton and rewarded regular attendance with chocolate saved from the ration by herself and 'Nanny Harrison.' My mother considered this bribery. Try explaining that to a sweetless youngster.

After the war the Rev. Stanley Moore was Vicar at Worfield. He was very good about house to house visiting and would just arrive. I recall that one day my mother was redecorating a bedroom and when the Rev Moore arrived I said that mother was upstairs. 'That's all right,' he said, 'I will go up,' and he bounded up the stairs. Mother said afterwards, rather euphemistically, 'that it might not have been convenient.' Fortunately for both of them, on this occasion it was 'convenient.' Years later I heard from another clergyman that Mr Moore had felt rather a failure at Worfield but he was held in high regard by the parishioners. I remember the time we were talking about Remembrance Day, he said, 'Do not glorify battle, those men did not go willingly to die. They went, often cursing and swearing, to do their duty.' He always had time for the 'little man' and to talk to children.

There were three gypsies living in Ackleton. In the field just above The Folley lived Mr & Mrs Lee and on the edge of the village on the Pattingham Road lived Mrs Lee's brother, Bluey Locke. We never knew his true name but his nickname came from his very blue eyes. Mr and Mrs Lee had a horse and cart and would travel around the local area selling pots and pans, bowls, buckets, brushes and so on. Mr and Mrs Lee lived, as did Mr Locke, in a gypsy caravan. Mrs Lee used to give me her radio battery to take to the garage at Worfield to be recharged. It is many years since Mr Bentley's old garage was demolished and no-one has batteries like those now. After they were recharged I would take them back again, riding one handed on my bicycle and holding the battery well away from me by its thin wire handle. The battery was about five inches square. All went well until my mother found out and was cross because I could have been badly burnt by the acid if I had fallen off my cycle.

Before the war my father had worked on various farms, including that of Mr Austin, which is how we came to be living at Cosford. As an employee he would do anything he was asked in a polite

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manner. If not he was off to another job. Unfortunately with the job went the house. Our new home belonged to Mr Nock and so was not a tied cottage. When father started his new job as an air ministry policeman at Cosford he worked shifts so he still did some farm work. He was an excellent hedge layer and would hoe and later pull sugar beet and do other jobs as needed. As well as his farming activities he helped Mr Mason, the coal man who lived below the Room Bank, with his deliveries and of course there was not a weed in his allotment.

After the war the air ministry wanted father to go away and train as an inspector. However when he was away training as a sergeant, mother had a dreadful accident; she slipped on the back yard near the pigsty and ripped the skin off her back. The injuries were so bad that mother's life was feared for and with three young children to look after, father was naturally anxious about going away again. So rather than train for promotion he took redundancy and got a job at the malthouse which was operating as a grain dryer. Father was a good worker and all went well until one day a group of workers were talking about how bad the pay was. The gist of the conversation was that we need a pay rise or we go on strike. 'It's all very well your sitting here talking about it but who is going to ask, said father?' 'You're good at putting things, we thought you might go,' they said. Father stated the case to management who heard him out and then the boss said, 'pick up your pay and your cards on the way out.' That was the end of father's job at the malthouse but the incident with management epitomised my father, a man of principle and much-liked by all who knew him. After the malthouse experience he did a variety of jobs until he had a serious motor cycle accident in 1957.

These are some of my memories of Ackleton immediately and just after the war. By 1946 there was a school bus and I suppose in the end it was the car which changed the village, making the it less of a community and more of a group of houses with people living separate lives. The war and pre-war years were hard times but there were simple pleasures which have now gone in the fast pace of life today.