

Brian Saunders Memories

Brian Saunders

I was born at home in Lansdown Road, Chalfont St Peter, just a couple of roads away from Pennington Road where I live now. That was on 19 November 1936. My mother told me that the doctor came in thick fog and had to walk along Austenwood Lane and down Gold Hill to get to our house. Our home in Lansdown Road was knocked down many years ago. My Mum's name was Alice, and my Dad was Jack. Dad served in the Oxon and Bucks Light Infantry during the War and was Head Greenkeeper at Chalfont St Peter Golf Club. Mum was a stand-by nurse at the hospital in the village. They met when a dog ran across the road and it was hit by a car. Mum ran into the road to try and help the dog, and she and Dad started talking. They had two children, me and my sister Joan, who was born on 21 November 1937, almost exactly a year after my birth. Joan (Mrs Joan Darville) lived in Little Chalfont (Beel Close and Elizabeth

Avenue) but sadly died a short time ago in early 2019.

I can remember a bit about my Grandad, too. He was a gamekeeper at Stoke Park. He had big sideboards and a big moustache, and when we went to see him, he would have a rabbit ready-skinned for us. He kept a big 12-bore gun in the corner of the room.

My earliest memory goes back to when I was about two years old. Mrs Rance, one of Mum's friends, took me and her little girl for a walk. It was a boiling hot July day, and we had a thunderstorm. We sheltered in the woods, all crammed into a pram, but we still got soaking wet.

I went to the village school near St Peter's Church. The infant school had just one class of 30 children and was in what is now called the Church Room. Miss Newbury was the headteacher. She was small and dumpy, with

her hair in a bun and wearing glasses. There were two middle schools separated by railings – one for girls, the other for boys. Next to them there were some beautiful horse chestnut trees, and I can remember the sound of the conkers falling on the school roof. I can still remember the names of the teachers. There was Mr Williams, the headmaster, who was snarling but fair – he did a bit of everything. We called him ‘Skipper’. Mr Randall taught Maths (he spoke very precisely – three pounds three shillings and threppence – not ‘thruppence’); Mr Rymer taught English; and Mrs Southgate taught Music and History. Another memory that sticks is from 1943, when I would have been six or seven. I went to school as usual with my best mate, Alan Bradshaw, and when we arrived, we found a woman and a boy standing outside. The boy looked utterly lost, hopeless; he didn’t have a clue what was going on. It turned out he was an evacuee from London. But next day he was not there. His mother had gone back to London where she worked in a munitions factory and she

had been killed when the factory suffered a direct hit. We never saw that boy again. There was an air raid shelter the length of one side of the school, and we would all go into it whenever the air raid sirens sounded. I don't know whether we were very safe there – I think the shelter would have gone as well if the school had had a direct hit. At one stage, the school had so many evacuees coming out from London that it had to transfer some of the children to a room behind Gold Hill Chapel, and I think I spent about a year having my lessons there. It must have been at about that time too that lorries brought heaps of bricks and wood from London, the debris from bombed buildings, and deposited them on fields where Chalfont St Peter Football Club now plays. After the war, huge vehicles with eight- or nine-foot wheels levelled the heaps off, and in later years the footballers would sometimes cut their knees on shards of glass which had worked their way to the surface.

There are other memories of the war. There was an Ack Ack battery at Whan Cross in Welders Lane, and whenever there was an air-raid we would see the search lights across the sky and hear the guns go 'boom, boom'. The battery was converted into a bungalow at the end of the war. One of the targets for the Germans was the railway line that runs from London through Seer Green and Gerrards Cross and on to Birmingham. Trains brought coal from the Midlands to London to be used at Battersea Power Station – 264- class locomotives, with 50 wagons full of coal, all empty on the return journey. There were three big craters near Gerrards Cross after one attack. The nearest bomb to our house was in Croft Road on the other side of the village. And then there was the time when Alan and I were playing close to Gold Hill Common and we saw a Messerschmitt being chased by a Spitfire. We should have been frightened, but we had no fear. The Messerschmitt was shot down and crashed outside Iver, where it took the tops off all the

trees. The trees are stunted to this day. If the air-raid siren went off at night-time, Mum would bring Joan and me downstairs and make us sit under a wooden table and then throw a blanket over it. Sometimes the ARP (Air Raid Precautions) Warden would knock at our door to say that a chink of light was showing through our curtains.

Although we did not know what was going on at the time, on the day before D-Day the sky over Chalfont St Peter was black with transport planes towing gliders and carrying jeeps and troops. The drone of the planes was awful. We tried to count them, but there were too many. Were they from Brize Norton? I don't know.

One of our neighbours was an ambulance driver during the War. It was only towards the end of his life that he talked about being called to an incident at an Ack Ack battery in Hyde Park. He found a little pair of Wellington boots with a child's feet inside.

At the end of the war, following demobilisation, Mrs Silver, another of our neighbours, hung an old pillowcase over her front door with the words, 'Welcome Home' painted on it for her husband on his return. She lent that pillowcase to other families up and down the road to use as their husbands came home from the war. One or two men, sadly, never came back.

After peace was declared, there was a Feast Day celebration in June 1945, a procession of floats going through the village up to Gold Hill Common. I remember a long-wheelbase, flat-bed truck decorated with a Bucks swan. The celebration is still held every year but is much smaller now than it used to be. There used to be a firework display at night with a huge bonfire, and four to five thousand people would go. One year, someone set the bonfire alight during the afternoon before the celebrations were due to start, and they had to let it burn itself out. Cicely Courtneidge opened the celebration once, and

she was driven around in a veteran car. Mr Crane, one of our neighbours, won a television in the Feast Day raffle in one of the early years, but his was one of the cottages in Lansdown Road with no electricity. He had to have electricity installed before he could enjoy his prize. Another year, Harry Fox, who ran a pig farm at Gold Hill Common, dressed up as John Bull. He was about 80 years old at the time. I used to help out at the pig farm at weekends when I was about 15 years old. I had to get up at five in the morning, clean out the pigs, mix up their food and feed them. Harry had a horse and cart drawn by a lovely old horse called Charlie. We used to whistle to the sound of Charlie's clip-clopping. One day, it was Christmas Eve, Harry Fox dropped backwards: he had had a heart attack and died instantly.

My Dad had a brother, Archibald. Archibald, my uncle, was on a troopship taking soldiers to Africa. There were hundreds of soldiers on the deck when the ship was strafed by a

Messerschmitt, and my uncle was one of those killed. His name is on the war memorial in the village.

Alan and I sometimes walked to Leachcroft which was next to a cornfield. The harvesters were not so efficient in those days, and we went there to glean, picking up the ears of corn left on the ground. I remember a hollowed-out tree in the woods catching fire on one occasion, and the fire brigade ran their hoses from a nearby pond to draw water to put it out. We nicknamed the wood 'The Dead Wood' after that. And sometimes we walked beside the railway line from Gerrards Cross towards Seer Green looking for lumps of coal. Those were the days of rationing of course. There were food coupons which entitled you to $\frac{1}{4}$ lb of margarine, $\frac{1}{4}$ lb of sugar and $\frac{1}{4}$ lb of tea a week. Such were the shortages that Mum would chop up the potato peelings and cook them. Meat was non-existent. The shop assistant would mark the coupon with a blue cross once it had been used so that you

could not use it again. There was also a coupon for clothing – one pair of shoes every six months. When we had chickens at home, we would give a neighbour a couple of eggs in return for some margarine. I don't think we were supposed to do that. People made their own produce, too, things like gooseberry jam. And because coal was rationed, we used to go to the woods to get firewood.

I think we had a happy childhood. We enjoyed a freedom to do things which children are not allowed to do today, because their parents want to know where they are all the time. Lansdown Road was not tarmacked when we lived there, and we used to make paper boats to float in the puddles. We played cricket on Gold Hill Common and roamed for hours and hours and hours in Leachcroft Woods. Our parents did not worry about us coming to harm. I remember snowy winters when we tobogganed from the Common down through the village to a grassy area at the bottom (there were not many cars on

the road in those days). At night it was very dark – all the bulbs of the streetlamps had been taken out – and the children fixed torches to the front of their toboggans. It was lovely to stand at the bottom of the hill and watch all the lights bobbing up and down. And then we did snow clearing at the Golf Club and were paid 6d a day (that's 2½ pence in today's money!).

Other memories from my childhood? A friend of our family was a local farmer, and he gave us a tractor tyre inner tube. We carried this up the River Misbourne towards Chalfont St Giles and then, using some poles as oars, we floated down the Misbourne, past Gravel Hill, under the bridge by the Church, under the shops and on towards Chalfont Park. And talking of the shops, it was very different before today's precinct was built. There was a Co-op, two butchers, two sweet shops, a grocer's (Mr Flower), a newsagent (Mrs Clapham), Reader's knitting shop, Newman's bakers, Richard Knight's butcher's shop, Upham's bakery. There were no banks there

then. When we were children, there was early closing day on Wednesdays, when shops shut at 1 pm, and of course no shops opened on Sundays. I remember the outcry when Mr Cowden's sweet shop was given permission to open for one hour on Sunday afternoons. There was also Barracks Yard, on the site of an old coaching inn, The Crossed Keys, where they used to stable the horses in the days when stagecoaches ran between Uxbridge and Aylesbury.

I mentioned earlier that my Mum was a stand-by nurse at the hospital in the village. Just after the war, the middle section of the hospital caught fire, and some of the patients had to be brought out on wheelbarrows. The fire featured in Pathe News reports which were shown in cinemas in those days.

When I left the village school, I went to Old Job's School (what is now Chalfont Community College), which was made up of 12 to 15

temporary pre-fabs. There were four classes when I joined the school, and a further two by the time I left. Again, I can remember the teachers' names: Mr Horley was the Headmaster. He was a disciplinarian – very strict but fair. He worked in a little cramped office. Miss Dean taught PT and History; Miss Gomme, Maths; Miss Darville, RE; Mr Smith, English; Miss Nicholson, Cookery; and Mr Stephens, Carpentry. Mr Stephens was a huge man – 6 foot 4 inches and 15 stone. He was very interested in bees, and there were six hives at the school. One of them had a glass panel so that we could watch the bees. I remember some clever gadget: you turned the handle and centrifugal force made the honey fall out of the bottom of the hive into a tub. There were coke stoves (Tortoise stoves) in the classrooms, and we used to put our socks and shoes around the stoves to dry out if we got caught in the rain. I remember that we put cardboard in our shoes at wintertime. There was a footpath going past the

school, and one lunchtime when I was out there, a dog came past and took out part of my leg.

While I was at Old Job's, the school was preparing a large area to lay as a playing field for football and cricket, and once a week we were given a bucket and told to go and pick up stones. There was a large pile in one corner. During my time at the school, they built an assembly hall, and Mr Stephens helped build a stage in it. There was a time, too, when they wanted volunteers for potato picking. We were all given big baskets, and we followed the tractor as it lifted the potatoes and we picked them up. All the potatoes were then tipped into a big, rickety old lorry.

I have mentioned the railways a couple of times. When I was young, I loved the sounds of steam trains, and I used to stand in the shunting yards at Gerrards Cross station listening to them. In some ways, I'm a sad old individual even now – I've got 6 CDs produced by Argo with recordings

of these old trains made at Duffield Bank in Derby, on the West Highland Line, the Bluebell Line, the Ffestiniog Railway and so many more.

I haven't yet referred to what is obvious about me when you meet me: I am blind. I have a hereditary eye condition called Retinitis Pigmentosa (RP). It is carried by females, but only develops in males. My maternal grandmother was a carrier. She had two sons and a daughter, my Mum. As I have noted before, Mum had two children, Joan and me. I inherited RP. Two of Joan's children have also inherited the condition. Mum did not realise that my eyesight was getting bad until she dropped a penny one day and I struggled to find it, going round and round without seeing it. It was very difficult for me at school because I could not see the blackboard properly. I was handicapped from quite a young age, and I can remember a time when my eyes were like frosted glass. Typically, sufferers progress from having partial sight to tunnel vision and then to losing their

sight completely between the ages of 17 and 20. I went blind when I was 20. I have heard a suggestion that RP is somehow caused by the chalky water in the chalky Chilterns, but I think that is probably a myth.

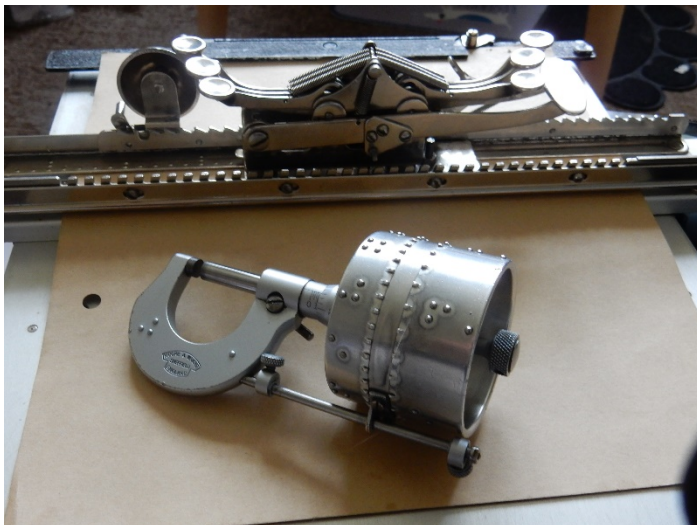
There was a craze at about that time for fluorescent socks, but Mum had to tell me that I had got a pink sock on one foot and a green one on the other. Since then, I have only worn black socks: you can't mismatch them!

From February to May 1957, I stayed at a training school for the blind run by the RNIB in Torquay. This was Manor House, at the highest point in Torquay, and it was sold to the RNIB by the owner of Barratts Shoes for a pound. Some people who go blind just give up; others do lots with their lives. Manor House made me. It gave me everything I needed to lead an independent life. It was brilliant. While there, Mrs Turner taught me touch typing and I learnt to type Braille. I still have my old Braille typewriter with

its six keys. The carriage goes from right to left, punching into the paper, so that when you turn the sheet over you can read the Braille from left to right, as you would ordinary writing. Braille uses lots of contractions: for example, there is one symbol for 'st', another for 'tion', and others for 'er', 'with' and 'the'. Reading and writing using Braille is a dying skill these days, what with the use of audio tapes and computer memory sticks. After my first 3 weeks learning to type, I sent a letter home to my Mum. Unfortunately, I picked up a blank piece of paper to put in the envelope and sent that to her. That taught me to put a paper clip on anything I had typed. I was also taught mobility, light engineering and handicrafts. Mr Drake was the Principal, Dotty Smith taught Braille, Potty Smith taught pottery (what else?) and Mr Mills light engineering. Mrs Dixon was in charge of handicrafts and mobility training. She used to take us out for walks, each time taking us a little further so that we would gradually learn the route. Once we walked along the jetty at the sea front, and I leant on the guard

rail on one side of the jetty to listen to the sea. I then crossed over to the other side and leant on the guard rail – but there was no guard rail, and I fell into the sea. One of the other trainees there was Lavinia Baker, a blind Welsh girl, who'd been there a month when I arrived. She was marvellous: she helped me learn the way to the town centre to find Marks and Spencer, Woolworth's and Boots. After Torquay, I went to a training centre at Letchworth Garden City for 6 weeks' training as a capstan lathe operator.

Brian's Stansby Braille typewriter and micrometer



I got a job at Commercial Ignition Limited at Tatling End, next to the Phoenix Garage, and I worked there for the next 38 years as a capstan lathe operator. There was a legal obligation on companies to employ a certain number of blind people, and lots of blind people worked on these lathes in those days. My job was to make such things as inserts for distributor caps, spindles for window winding motors for Rolls Royce, solenoids and dipper switches. For a while, I travelled to work on a tandem, or I would get a bus from the village at 7.20 am. The Company provided transport for people living in Maple Cross, Uxbridge and Denham, and eventually introduced a minibus for those of us living in Chalfont St Peter. If the minibus didn't run for some reason or was late, we were docked money from our wages for being late to work! I can remember leaving work at 4.30 pm one afternoon in the very bad winter of 1963 and waiting for a public bus for 3 hours. I was so cold that I couldn't feel the money in my pockets.

Two years before I was due to retire, the business was sold to Evos for £2.5 million, and I was made redundant. When I left, they gave me the micrometre I had used throughout my time with the firm. This is an instrument with a calibrated screw used for the accurate measurement of the components I made. My micrometre had been especially adapted with Braille guides so that I could work as accurately as a sighted person. When I started at Commercial Ignition, my foreman was John Glenister, a smashing man. I also remember Les Alloway, who travelled from Eton to Tatling End for 30 years to work on a capstan lathe. Les was killed by a landmine in the desert. The company was owned by Lionel Faulks, and he was a hard task master. He'd say, "If you want a drink, there's a tap in the cloakroom". I had only been working at Tatling End a short time when another member of the team was sharpening something on a grindstone without wearing his protective goggles. A bit of metal flew into his eye, and he had to wear an eye patch for 3 weeks. He

complained to John Glenister, 'I can only see with one eye.' John replied, 'What about Brian? He can't see out of either eye.' That completely changed that man's attitude.

When I was younger, my ambition had been to go into horticulture, and on leaving school I worked for a while at Ardwell Nurseries in Beaconsfield. The hours were 8am to 5pm Monday to Friday, 8am to 4pm Saturday and 8am to 2pm Sunday. I got paid £2:3 shillings a week (£2:15 pence in today's money). The nursery is now Copperfields housing estate. I would have loved working at a nursery, but with my failing eyesight I couldn't do it – I couldn't read the seed packets. I still enjoy gardening. I have laid turfs in our garden, raised paving slabs on their edge and built borders. When our children were growing up, I grew cabbages, cauliflowers, runner beans and broad beans. Now, the garden is mostly grassed, but I still love planting some flowers. I have got two hardy dianthus which have a lovely perfume,

sunflowers, a globe artichoke, red hot pokers and a potentilla shrub. I mostly grow flowers for their perfume now, because of course colour means nothing to me. Plants are expensive, but if you can afford it, it is best to buy three or five and group them – it looks much better. I remember a little rhyme about feeding plants: nitrogen for shoots, phosphates for roots and potash for flowers and fruits.

Talking about gardening reminds me that someone once reported me to the Council because they had seen me doing things in the garden, and presumably thought that I was fraudulently claiming some sort of assistance. A member of the Council staff came to check up on me and asked me various questions to test whether I could see: 'Who's in that photograph over there?', or 'I've dropped my pen. Can you pick it up for me?'

I got married at St Peter's Parish Church on 16 March 1963. I had met Sue when we both went

on a coach outing organised by Alf Webb to Brafield Stadium in Northampton to watch stock car racing. I had lost my sight by that time, so I have never seen Sue. Sue was born in Maple Cross before moving out to Chalfont St Peter, where she worked at Upham's, one of the bakeries I remember from the time I floated down the Misbourne on a tractor tyre inner tube. She once told me that, when working there, she was not concentrating one day while making doughnuts and tried to inject strawberry jam into her finger. I remember our wedding day: we were kneeling before the Vicar when he signalled to us to stand up; my knee was pressing on Sue's dress; Sue saw the signal, I didn't; and as she stood up, I didn't move; but no harm was done. It had been a very cold and snowy winter, and I remember that the snow had lain on the ground until about 10 days before our wedding. We didn't have any more snow on our big day, but the heavens opened as we came out of the church. Sue is one of five children – she has a brother Les, who lives in Wales, another brother

Peter in nearby Glebe Road in Chalfont St Peter, and a sister Virginia on the Isle of White. Her brother, George, had a serious heart complaint, and would get breathless and turn blue just climbing the stairs. But he never complained. Sadly, he died, aged 12, shortly after an operation at the Brompton Hospital in London and only a little time after Sue and I had got married. He was a brilliant cartoonist.

After our wedding, we had a holiday at the Lauriston Hotel in Knightstone Road, Weston-Super-Mare, a lovely hotel only 50 yards from the sea. The holiday was arranged through the RNIB. Another year, I went through the RNIB to the Russell Hotel in Bognor Regis.

Sue and I have two sons, and of course I have never seen them either. Michael is 43 (in 2019) and is married to Tony, and they have two children, Danny and Jemma. They live in Aylesbury where Michael is a postman. Michael was only aged 6 or 7 when he said, "I'm going to

be a postman". He worked for many years at Gerrards Cross and would have to get up at 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning to cycle there from Pennington Road. He was doing his rounds on the day of the big storm in 1987, when there were trees down all over the place. He kept on having to lift his bike over trees fallen across the road. Someone had the nerve to ask why his mail was late. I can remember a time when there were two deliveries and two collections a day, and a delivery every hour in London. Michael could only have been coming up to school age when he met me one day out in the street when I was coming home from work. He slipped his dirty, grimy, sticky hand into mine and said, "You're all right now, Dad; you're safe with me". I still feel emotional when I think about it. Some years before that, when Michael was in his play pen, Sue said to me that he was standing there with his arms raised wanting me to pick him up. How often had that happened and I didn't know? Robbie, our second son, is 39 and lives in Launceston in Cornwall in an old vicarage next to

a churchyard. He is married to Chris, but has a son, Ashley, from an earlier relationship. He's a hard worker but has had bad luck with his jobs. He worked for the Victoria Wine Company which imported wines from France, but an increase in tariffs badly affected that business. Since then, he has worked in Associated British Food's factory, but that is going to close very shortly, and Robbie will be made redundant. He is looking for another job, but might have to travel miles to find one, and public transport in Cornwall is not very good. Sue still manages to go to Cornwall sometimes to see him.

We had some family holidays on Hayling Island, where Sue had spent a lot of time when she was young, but it was expensive and running the home and feeding the children always came first.

We celebrated our 50th wedding anniversary in 2013, and I ordered a bouquet for Sue from Marks and Spencer. But they got it all wrong: they included chrysanthemums instead of

carnations and tied the bouquet up in black ribbons! It took me three weeks to sort it out.

I have enjoyed listening to the Talking Newspaper for many years. I get the Beaconsfield Talking Newspaper on a memory stick every week.

There is also an Amersham and Chesham Talking Newspaper which started, I think, in 1983. The RNIB produces CDs with a selection of magazine articles, and through them I enjoy listening to articles from Which? Magazine, The Literary Review, The Spectator, Gardener's World and Astronomy magazine. Today, I have a Concerto Two machine, on which I can listen to FM and digital as well as material sent to me on CD, tape and memory stick.

As far as hobbies are concerned, I enjoy pottering around the garden. Apart from cutting the grass, I do everything else myself. And I used to have an allotment until the boys grew up. I would sometimes go there in the morning between 5 and 6 am, or I would come home

from Tatling End and work there until 8 or 9 pm. Since 1988, I have been a member of the Chalfont Blind Club, and on its committee since 1989. It's very important that some blind people should be committee members so that they can understand issues from a blind person's point of view and say what blind people want. I've always been happy to put my oar in when necessary. We often have a quiz, and here are a couple of sample questions: What was introduced into this country in 1937? The 999 emergency number. And which Abba song is a palindrome? SOS. We have trouble these days in finding guest speakers, and also in getting volunteer drivers. Over the years, I particularly remember Val Doonican coming to one of our meetings. He sang 'Delaney's Donkey' to us. (The words of 'Delaney's Donkey' are appended at the end of this record of my life.) Val Doonican told us how he became famous. He was at an audition at the Pebble Mill Studios in the Midlands. A 15-year-old girl was sitting in a rocking chair, about to start her audition, but she

got stage fright and ran off. Val sat in the chair instead and sang 'Delaney's Donkey'. It was the start of his career.

Tenniel Evans also came to talk to us. He is most famous for playing Leading Seaman 'Taffy' Goldstein in 'The Navy Lark'. He was born in Kenya and came to the UK when he was seven years old. He told us that he had never known the cold before coming to England and landed at Southampton wearing khaki shorts. Evans spoke about his life in Africa. It looked as if there were clouds in the sky and it was about to rain, but it was a cloud of locusts. The locusts landed and within a short time had stripped all the trees and shrubs of their leaves. He wrote a very good memoir called 'Don't Walk in the Long Grass'. He came to England in 1936 at the age of 10 to lead a middle-class life in a Midlands rectory, leaving behind him an unconventional childhood of running barefoot in Kenya with his African friends. Like his father, he later became a priest in the Church of England. Tenniel Evans' wife is

still involved on the Talking Newspapers magazines.

On another occasion, the speaker was Audrey Wheelband, a local historian. She was talking about 'Hidden Bucks', and she projected images onto a big screen – to the blind! It was the only time I fell asleep!

Brian Ward, one of the volunteer drivers at the Club, also gave a talk once on World War II. I remember him describing Doodlebugs, the V1 bombs, flying next door to Wycombe Grammar School. They had a sound like motor bikes running slowly. Your heart would be in your mouth as they came towards you. Everyone was terrified that the engines would stop, because the bombs would then just fall to the ground. The Spitfires used to intercept them before they crossed the coastline and would try to tip their wings so that they would fall into the sea. And then the Germans started launching the much larger V2 bombs.

I have mentioned much earlier my best mate at school, Alan Bradshaw. Alan had an older brother, Derek who went on to become a Director of Kellogg's Corn Flakes. It was Derek who introduced me to another love of mine, classical music. He had a record of Mozart's 'Eine Kleine Nachtmusik'. I listen to Classic FM a lot. I enjoy Catherine Bott's programme, and recently heard her playing Vaughan Williams' 'The Lark in the Morning'. It is beautiful. I love hearing music by Albinoni and Vivaldi. And then there's the slow movement from Max Bruch's D Minor Concerto, and Bizet's Orpheus in the Underworld. I love it all.

Alan, incidentally, was a very good footballer and played for Wycombe Wanderers at the time when Wycombe got to the FA Amateur Cup Final, playing Bishop Auckland at Wembley Stadium in 1957. Bishop Auckland won 3-1.

Being blind presents a number of problems. Cars parking on pavements are an absolute nightmare. And then there are repair works on footpaths and pavements. I went down to the village one Sunday morning and fell into a trench about 2 feet wide by 2 feet deep dug for some kerb works. There should have been guard rails or tapping rails around the hole. I wrote to Talking Newspapers about it, and my letter was printed. Electric, battery-operated cars are a new hazard for the blind, as they make no sound. You used to be able to stand at the roadside and listen for cars. You can't hear them coming now, and don't know whether it is safe to cross. There was another occasion when I went to the bottom of the village and wanted to cross the road by the Zebra crossing. I said to a lady beside me, 'Would you like to help me cross the road?' When we got to the other side, she said, 'Thank you for helping me!' 99.9% of people are brilliant in helping the blind, but a few are horrible. I have been purposely tripped and have been the butt of unpleasant sarcastic remarks.

'Hello, blindy', someone once said to me. I used to go down to the village a lot, to do a bit of shopping or to get the neighbour's morning paper, but my legs are giving out a bit now.

Another problem for blind people is answering the door when you're alone in the house. The police suggested that I should have a spy hole! There was a time about 8 or 9 years ago when someone called wanting to read the gas and electricity meters. He was up to no good, and I was able to tell the police that the man was the same height as me, because I could feel his breath on my face; and that he was a smoker, because I could smell the smoke on his clothes.

Touch and sound are the most important senses for me. I see with my hands. I can feel whether plants have shiny leaves or are fern-like. And a blind person concentrates on the sounds he can hear when out walking. It can get confusing though when things change. For example, coaches used to have their engines at the front,

but now they are at the back. Which end of the coach do you go to, to get on board? Blind people become much more alert in their hearing. I remember going to Uxbridge one day with my friend, Alan. There was a fire somewhere and a fire engine was on its way. I heard the sound of the fire engine's bell long before Alan did. In the garden, I can hear the sound of thrushes with snails in their beaks, tapping them on the ground to break them. I hear a little flutter and know that it is a bird moving in the tree. If you ask a blind person whether he would prefer to be without his sight or his hearing, I think 98% would say that they would want their hearing. It must be dreadful not to be able to hear music, or the sound of children playing.

I try to be as independent as possible, and Sue of course is enormously helpful. I always leave things in a particular place where I know I will find them. For example, when I do the washing-up, I know where the tea towel will be. Sometimes, though, Sue does the washing-up and leaves the

tea towel in a different place. So, when I then do some washing-up, the tea towel is not where I expect it to be! We learnt long ago not to leave doors half open. And it's very easy for other people to forget that I cannot see. There was a time when I put food out for a fox. 'Where's the fox's dish?' 'Over there on the lawn!'

There are lots of gadgets to help blind people. Making a cup of tea, for example, is no problem. I've got a liquid level indicator which has a short prong and a long prong. When the water in the kettle touches the short prong, a sensor goes bleep. Peter White, a friend at the Blind Club, prefers the finger test instead! And then there are talking clocks, talking watches, talking fridges, microwaves and washing machines. Most of these things are very expensive. Some, like my talking clock, have an awful American voice.

There are other tricks I use to help me. For instance, it is difficult to know what is in cans of

food. You can shake the can, but that doesn't often help. So, I use elastic bands: one band means this, two means that, and so on.

I get annoyed when people who have lost part of their sight complain that they can't do this and that. It's amazing what you can do when you try. I heard on the radio many years ago about a blind runner who competed at the Olympics, helped by a guide runner with him. Unfortunately for him, his foot was 2 centimetres in front of his guide's foot at the finishing line, and he was disqualified.

Another thing I try to do is to draw a picture in my mind's eye. But people find it difficult to describe things, and I don't think I would recognise the village if I saw it now; it will have changed so much.

I had some training to prepare for having a guide dog. This was at Leamington Spa. I went out for a walk with my hand on the shoulder of a sighted

person in front of me. This was to get us used to putting complete faith in our guide. If you have a guide dog, you have to put your full trust in the dog and follow it wherever it leads you. You cannot pull against it. I decided however that it would not be fair for me to have a dog: I was working a full day every day at Commercial Ignition Ltd, and it would not have been fair on the dog to keep it penned up all day while I worked. Quite a number of blind people train as piano tuners, and they can make good use of guide dogs. One of the most famous blind people with a guide dog is David Blunkett, the Labour politician, and he has written a book called 'On a Clear Day', recounting his life with his guide dogs.

It's always good to be able to laugh at yourself, and I ought to end with some jokes about blind people. A man goes into the opticians to have his eyes tested. The optician says, 'Can you read the chart?' The man replies, 'Where's the chart?' Here's another: A man goes into a shop

and says, 'I've come into the opticians to have my eyes checked. My sight is very bad.' The shop assistant says, 'You're dead right. This is the greengrocers. The optician is next door!'