

## Martin Biddle

### Memories of Repton 1941-5, during World War II

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We arrived in Repton by car from Barmouth in Wales in July or August 1941. I had my fourth birthday in Barmouth on 4 June that year and that day, which I have never forgotten, was marked by teaching me to sail on the estuary of the Mawddach river. Our real home was North Harrow, in what was then Middlesex, but we had moved to Barmouth in September 1940, with dog fights in the sky high above, because my father (Reginald Samuel Biddle) was to open and run a military tailoring business there for his employers, Studd and Millington Ltd, of Chancery Lane, London, to serve the requirements of 164 Officer Cadet Training Unit which had opened at Barmouth that September.

Mr Studd had now decided that a new branch should be opened in Repton to serve the needs of 206 OCTU, RAOC/REME, stationed at Foremark Hall, and asked my father to take it on. My father's shop was on the ground floor of 73 Main Street, with a large window looking on to Main Street, on the north corner of an entry leading east off High Street down to what I remember as a cattle yard. My father, who was very particular about such things, had probably had the name of his firm, 'Studd and Millington', with the phrase 'Military Tailors and Outfitters', or some such, painted on the moulded fascia which still survives above the window. He was joined there by his cutter, Mr Lane, who worked at his cutting table on the first floor, overlooking the lane down to the east. He remained with my father until the branch was closed at the end of the war in 1945 when we returned to North Harrow.

My father would measure the officer cadets for their day uniforms, and perhaps their service dress, and Mr Lane would cut the cloth and 'bast' (pronounced *baist*: I remember how it sounded, meaning, as I now know, to sew up with large stitches in a preliminary fashion) the cut pieces so that my father could fit the loosely sewn uniform on the officer cadet for whom it was being made, and instruct for any necessary adjustments. By chance I still have a few of the foolscap pages on which my father wrote the details of each month's orders and see that two of these refer respectively to 'Course 26: Ending Friday Sept. 5th' [i.e. 1941] and to '50 Coy. REME. Ending Friday Dec. 17<sup>th</sup> [19]43'. The business in September 1941 added up to £1469 -1-11, a very large sum those days.

When we first arrived in Repton we stayed in a house with a large garden on the east side of Main Street, probably Stratford Cottage (5 Main Street today, to judge by the Ordnance Survey large scale map), just south of the junction with Pinfold Lane. Here we were soon joined by my grandmother Amy Helen Baker (née Mahoney), who had been living with us in Harrow after my grandfather's death in 1939. Late that summer of 1941 my grandmother taught me to write at her knee in the ground-floor front room of the house: copper-plate on paper specially ruled for the purpose with closely-spaced lines. We remained there for some months during which for at least part of the time a wounded RAF officer was in bed upstairs, his wound being dressed by my mother, Gwladys Florence Biddle (née Baker), and probably also by my grandmother who had nursing experience

from the First War. His name I have never forgotten: it was Geoffrey de Freitas, presumably the later Squadron Leader, well known Labour MP, and High Commissioner to Ghana, who died in 1982.

I joined the Kindergarten at St Wystan's School in September 1941. The school, run by Miss Sybil G. Heath and Miss Nancy Wallace, was then already on its present site on the east side of High Street, not far below The Cross. I was to stay there for the next four years, gaining a consistent reputation over these years (as my termly reports reveal) as clever but noisy and needing to be more obedient. It was a school of remarkable character where I was very happy and feel I did well. Is there anywhere today where would one learn at a pre-preparatory school (i.e. a sort of developed kindergarten) about Hadrian's Wall and draw plans of the Wall, its forts, and milecastles, or copy pages of the greatest Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, for example the Chi-Rho page of the Lindisfarne gospels, beginning *Christi autem generatio*? That was what Miss Wallace set us to do and it was probably there that my interest in archaeology began.

The war went on and we moved house, first to Pinfold Lane, probably to No. 3 or possibly No. 5, late in 1941 or early in 1942. We lived there for some time and must still have been there in the middle of 1942 in the months leading up to the battle of EL Alamein in October. The officer cadets from Foremark, some of whom came for home comforts, tea, sandwiches, cake, and baths in a movable tin tub in the downstairs back room, knew they were going to Alamein, so this must have been sometime in the long wait for the second and successful battle in October 1942.

Our third and final move was to a big flat over the front of Goodall's Garage where we lived from the latter part of 1942 for some three years until we left Repton in 1945. There was much to do in those years. I learned to ride at the stables on the west side of High Street, opposite the Garage. I became a Cub at St Wystan's. I first saw US soldiers in their very different helmets marching down the road towards Repton Shrubs, presumably in 1943 or 1944. My father had a small petrol allowance for the Repton business. I would go with him to Willington station to collect parcels from Studd and Millington's in London and sometimes there was just enough petrol for a short drive to see some church or castle. Holidays were spent with my aunts, my father's sisters, at Great Ayton in Yorkshire. The journey began by train from Willington station and went via York and its walls, round which my father and I would walk while waiting for a connection, and from there we went out to the North York moors, to Guisborough Priory, and the abbeys of Rievaulx, Byland, and Whitby, and I climbed Roseberry Topping.

The war was reaching its peak. From the summer of 1944 we had 'The Daily Telegraph Map of the War' pinned up on the wall of our living room above the Garage and little flags, British, American, French, and Russian (I still have both the map and the flags) which my father and I moved steadily forward month by month as the Germans retreated. I little dreamt then that twelve years later I would serve as a tank officer commanding 3 Troop, 1 Independent Squadron, Royal Tank Regiment, in Spandau outside Berlin and look down from my third-floor window at Herr Hess taking his daily walk in the prison garden next door.

One night towards the end of our time in Repton we left our flat over the Garage in a hurry, my mother, my father, and I rushing for shelter across High Street to the big house, The Bull's Head, opposite. As we crossed the road, I looked up and saw high in the dark sky the flames of half a dozen or so things moving high and fast from behind us. I know now that they were 'doodlebugs', V1 rockets, but how did we wake up and know to leave the Garage, where there were petrol tanks that might all too easily have blown up? I suppose there must have been a warning, perhaps a siren, but I don't remember it. What I do remember is that people were saying that the rockets must have been going to attack 'the marshalling yards'. I've never forgotten the phrase any more than the flares

from the rockets. A little research has revealed that this was almost the last V1 attack of the war, in the pre-dawn of 24 December 1944. Forty-six rockets were launched from Heinkel bombers over the North Sea. Thirteen fell into the sea but thirty-three made it. Manchester was probably the main target, but others fell all over the place, especially to the south, including one at Newport, Shropshire, 40 miles due west of Repton.<sup>1</sup> This was probably one of those which I saw passing high over High Street. People in Repton thought that one of the targets was probably Crewe, a vital railway junction and the site of one of the greatest train-marshalling yards in the country (hence the well-remembered word), but that I suppose was just a reasonable guess.

It must have been about this time, perhaps in the spring of 1945, that I walked up the grassy slope on the east side of the Brook to find a lot of digging going on, perhaps (as I now realise) for the construction of either Askew Grove or The Crescent. Deep trenches had been cut presumably for sewers and the men doing the work were foreign, wearing strange clothes, perhaps prison garments. I think they may have been Italian prisoners of war. I found their mess hut and looked inside and smelt food of a kind I didn't know. At that point, I was firmly sent packing.

Thereafter things seem to me to have moved very fast. The allied armies met at Torgau on 25 April 1945 which we marked with a special cross on our wall-map. By then there were Polish airmen in Brook House (in peace time one of Repton School houses) who had covered the roofs of the house with their white parachutes in anticipation of victory. Soon it was VE Day, 8 May 1945, when the whole village went in the morning to the parish church of St Wystan, at 11 am I think it was. And in the evening there was a huge bonfire in one of the school fields behind the Sanatorium.

Although the war was not yet over, a General Election was held on 5 July. The counting of votes was delayed until 26 July. and it must have been that afternoon that I heard my parents discussing the news of Mr Churchill's defeat, inexplicable to them, as we drove up Boot Hill in the car.

We stayed on at Repton until after VJ Day on 15 August when I did not distinguish myself. Somehow or other I had saddled a pony and ridden up to the yard of The Shakespeare Inn where there was a large bonfire (for me and that pony, see the photograph). The fire blazed up, the pony reared, and off I came, hard on my right side. I expect I got into a lot of trouble, but no memory of that has survived, only a long-lived pain which still flares up from time to time in my right hip.

Shortly afterwards we must have left Repton and returned home to North Harrow, in time for me to begin term at a new school, this time in Harrow. This proving truly awful I was taken away and my mother taught me for a few months until another school could be found.

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I must of course in these years (when I was between four and eight) have known about the big school behind the Repton Arch, but I have no memory of boys being there, and I guess we never went there in term time. To the contrary, when in the School Yard with my friends, as it seems to me we often were, all seemed as empty, as indeed it is today out of term. Nobody appeared to worry us. Nothing was locked up. We found the drums of the school band in an upstairs room behind the porter's lodge and banged them. Nobody minded that we went in and out of the crypt of the church down the steps to a door which was never locked.

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<sup>1</sup>I was able to identify the date and details from books on V1 attacks, especially, Peter J.C. Smith, *Air-launched Doodlebugs; The Forgotten Campaign* (Pen and Sword Books, Barnsley, 2006), 152-74, with map on p. 154.

There can be no doubt: these were the years which lie behind the enthusiasm with which, in the early 1970s, when Birthe Kjølbye and I heard Dr Harold Taylor lecture about the architecture of Repton church, I suggested to him that we might try to answer some of his questions about the development of St Wystans by digging beside the crypt which I must last have entered thirty years before.

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