

WARTIME & THE BAKERY

Harry Bennett

I bought a 1937 Rover BRK 210, this was a lovely comfortable well built car but it was a bit heavy on petrol. I ran it for some years and then the first small Estate cars began to appear on the market and I realised this would be a much more suitable vehicle as it would double as a small van. So I traded the Rover for a new Hillman Husky PDG 449. This was the best car I ever had except for the Wolsey; I ran it for 8 years and then changed it for a Herald Estate. This was the worst car I ever had. GDF 291. After 25 several years of continual trouble I got rid of it. I later saw the old Hillman in Loughborough when it was 18 years old. It was still going well.

In 1939 saw the outbreak of war. We had been expecting it for so long it was almost a relief when it actually did start. Although nothing happened at all for months, although Chamberlain negotiated peace in our time no one believed it, rearmament had started straight away. Cycling activities ceased soon after the outbreak of war the older ones were called up and the blackout made night riding unsafe, so we suspended operations till after the war. The club was finally disbanded in 1946. Although everyone had to register for military service at the start of the war some occupations were exempt from call up. People employed as munitions or essential goods manufacturers such as baking. In 1940 I joined the LDV, when it was first formed they only wanted ex-servicemen but after a few months they opened it to anyone and it became the Home Guard. The local Commanding Officer was Charlie Eldred the Customs and Excise Officer for the area. He signed me on, said to himself here's a chap who can read and write, and made me Company Quartermaster Sergeant, a job I held all through the war. In 1942 more manpower was needed and bakers as a reserved occupation ceased to be exempt. I had to go to Gloucester for a medical. A panel of about 6 doctors decided I was going to be more of a liability than an asset and that His Majesty's Forces would be better off without my services. It was then that one of the Army doctors warned me that my ragged appendix scar might be liable to a hernia one day if I was not careful. He was proved right about 35 years later.

To save labour and petrol, bread deliveries were restricted to 3 times a week to any house except Hotels and work canteens so we delivered to one end of town one day and the other end the next. In 1943 I received a letter from the Battalion Commanding Officer to say that my name had been brought to the notice to the Commander in Chief Home Forces and that I had received a commendation in the Kings Birthday Honours. As metal was a bit scarce for making medals I was given a piece of paper to that effect. It was presented by some General whose name I've forgotten. The ups and downs of the Home Guard would need a separate book to record. The television programme Dad's Army is not far from the truth. At the beginning we were armed with old American 1914 war rifles and machine guns supplied under the lease lend agreement. There were not enough to go around so the others had shotguns and any other weapons that could be found. The Police declared an amnesty on any unregistered 22 weapons that were handed in - it was amazing how much stuff turned up including some South African War dum dum bullets.

Later we were all armed with the newly developed sten gun - a cheap reliable automatic, but by the start of 1945 the chances of invasion were almost nil so we were

put on standby. Twice weekly training parades were stopped and all weapons were kept in the store room. After the fall of Japan we were finally disbanded. Weapons and hardware were returned but the men were allowed to keep uniform, great coats, belts, boots etc. These were very useful as working attire as clothes continued to be rationed for some years. So I was now out of my part time job and could turn my thoughts to other matters.

In 1946 we decided to purchase an electric dough mixer, this had been suggested before the war by me and father consulted Uncle Sam about it as he had had experience with mixers. His advice to father was "If you've got to make the dough yourself they're a good investment, if you've got someone to make them for you they're a waste of money". As father had got two people to make them for him he didn't bother. During the war no machinery was available and afterwards most of it had to go for export. But after six months we finally got delivery and life became much easier - work that took two hours could be done by one man in half an hour. 'About this time I noticed a young lady living next door in a cottage and I eventually married her - something I have never regretted. We were married on 24th April 1947 and I moved into Clifton Cottage where we lived for about 6 months then we heard that Hartley's Cottage in Leysbourne was to let so we took the tenancy from General Aizlewood of Paxford but a year later the General decided to sell it. So father bought it for his own use when he retired. He retired in 1950 and I took over the business and we moved back to High Street. This was to be my home for the next 41 years. We had two children, Richard in 1948 and Charlie in 1950. Otherwise life went on quite placidly.



Mrs Bennett with the van

The austerity conditions of the war years gradually came to an end and we were able to get a new Ford half ton van after a wait of 4 years. The old £100 Ford was written off in an accident in 1947 a terrible winter of deep snow which hung around for two months. I replaced this van with an American jeep 8 geared four wheeled drive vehicle which was ideal for use that winter they had been auctioned off as war surplus at Honeybourne depot for about £40 each. It had to be registered and licensed before use and in most cases a new battery. Stan Knott collected it from the sale and I towed it home and put it on the road registration number ANX283. It was a god send for the rest of that winter but very expensive to run. At 14 miles to the gallon it was more use to a farmer than a baker.



Charlie (left) and his brother Richard with the Morris van

So I changed it to a 8 horse power Morris van, this was a slightly better version than the 8 horse power Ford. I think they were about £120 new. This thing, DME 285 was a bit of a liability it developed a leaky petrol tank and a faulty gear box and a lot of other troubles. It lasted out till we got delivery of the new Ford KDD 877 and I was also able to get a private car. These were still difficult to obtain and were commanding ridiculous prices. But it was useful to have something to fall back on if the van went wrong. It was a 1929 Ford Model A built like a tank and nearly as heavy as one. It would do 45 miles an hour flat out BJ2960. It had been the property of a clergyman in Hereford it was a very reliable old thing. Eventually the half shaft went and I could not get a spare so it had to go.

The Ford 10 van, after some years of mistreatment by Jeff Carter and Frank Bird was replaced by another Ford Popular, MNF111 and then by the new Morris van, 1106DF. Business went well at first, some foods were still rationed and bread was being subsidised by the Government, to keep the price down to 4p per loaf and people were buying it to feed the pig. At the end of meat rationing pig keeping ceased to be attractive and it was the end of the subsidy. The cost of a loaf rose to a realistic price and bread sales started to decline. But on the other hand we were able to make more cakes and buns etc. and the business remained quite profitable. Then the Plant bakers came along with their ready sliced bread using grocery outlets for it. In order to compete we had to start selling it as they were taking all the best customers, hotels, sports club teas etc. Our version of the crusty loaf was unsuitable for slicing, as the hard crusts broke the blades of the slicer and we did not have the right type of ovens to produce soft crusty bread. In spite of all this we still survived.