



Selling G.B. Read's Champion Bullock at Horncastle Fat Stock Show.



*4th Lincolns at Ripon 1939-1940: Back row: Robert Bell, Gordon Spratt, John Gaunt, ?, Tony Bell;
Front row: Charles Spratt, Jack Wynn, ?.*

Memoirs of an Infantry Auctioneer



*R. H. Bell, Mareham Grange
1996*

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Infantry Auctioneer*



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Introduction

by Robert Lawrence Hay Bell

Having the same names as his father (and same initials as his grandfather) it was perhaps inevitable that Robert Hay Bell would follow his father into the family business of Land Agency. But by the tender age of 28 he had experienced more than many of us see in the whole of our lives.

He was born during the First World War at Lansdowne, Spilsby Road, Horncastle, the fourth child of six and the eldest son. His father was an auctioneer and land agent and came from a family of factors or land agents who had started in Perthshire. His great grandfather, George Bell, had secured the post of resident land agent on the Revesby Estate in 1842 bringing his family to Lincolnshire.

His quick open mind fostered an interest in a wide variety of subjects including, centrally, agriculture. It was his perseverance that kept Horncastle cattle market going (perhaps beyond its natural life). He was for many years secretary of the Horncastle Fatstock Show, as well as a committee member of the Farmers' Club. He was one of the first club leaders of Horncastle Young Farmers' Club as well as a trustee for a variety of charities and private individuals. A member of the Royal Forestry Society he was responsible for planting many woods on local estates as well as on his own farm. He was also a past president of the Lincolnshire Association of Agricultural Valuers.

He enjoyed working with his hands. He built a swimming pool at Mareham, as well as a filter tower. He built bridges, seats, a mud and stud hut in the garden at Mareham Grange, Windsor chairs, signs for local estates, a case for a grandfather clock (and his brother Tony made the workings). He was not fazed by the magnitude of any project.

After he died in 2007 many people wrote about their happy memories of tennis parties, Hunt meets at Mareham, boy's shoots on Boxing Day, pitch and putt and golf. He was an honorary member at Woodhall Spa Golf Club. Many stories abound reflecting his remarkable character. For instance he was in the habit of going to Woodhall golf course on a Saturday afternoon with a local farmer Ray Weightman. In those days RHB used to smoke a pipe. It was not easy to light and he would puff away hard to get it going. With the window open the sparks would fly especially going fast down the straight at Martin. The sparks were beginning to damage the back seat of Ray's car, so Ray politely pointed this out saying "You know Bob, there are a lot of holes in the back seat of my car!" RHB, quick as a flash, said "Do you know, Ray, I have the same trouble in my car!"

His original memoirs were written by him longhand. Too modest to note all his war record, we have added some detail as shown in italics, together with the photographs, maps and cuttings.

CHAPTER ONE

Before the War

When asked what he would like to have done had he had his life over again, my father was reputed to have said he'd prefer not to have it over again because he'd had a good life and the next might not be so good. I think I can truly say the same.

The highlights have been the close family into which I was born and the close family my wife and I have enjoyed rearing in our own peaceful surroundings.

I was born in a Victorian villa on the outskirts of the market town of Horncastle in the penultimate year of the Great War. I had three older sisters and one younger and Tony was the last, being two and a half years my junior.

My first recollection was tea with strawberries in the thatched summer house. I seem to remember my youngest sister Shirley as a baby wrapped up in white. This summer house was very old but it is still there and over it grows the pear tree. Without fail, it produced masses of hazel pears, which fell in September and it was great to get up in the morning and be first to find the best golden ones. The majority were just ordinary but here and there was a beauty. But that was when we were all young; that is to say Jean downwards because Heather and Betty were too old for that caper.

Beside the garden with the summer house was the paddock which belonged to my father, but below were "The Fields". Down the fields! That's where we went. The stream (The Waring) ran through the fields. They were all grass in those days, apart from one at Low Toynton. I believe they were all grass as far as Belchford, four or five miles away, where the stream started. And of course you could paddle and find minnows and tom-thumbs under the stones in the clear spring water. You could jump it here and there and there were various pools like Wilkinson's where it turned a corner from the "Crooks" and Walter's field where the huge willow tree grew and where later on I sat on my father's legs whilst he tickled a trout. He only tickled



The summer house at Lansdowne

a trout when he couldn't catch one with his rod. We usually went, I think in the spring, in the evening when there'd been some rain. He said the fish couldn't see you. He showed me how to set the hook and float and to cut a nick into a lead pellet and bite it tight – then we dug a few worms and put them in a tobacco tin with grass.

My father used to teach me a good many things like how to tie onions up and plant things in the garden like potatoes and I remember his forearms when he was trimming the hedge and looking at my own spindly little things.



We went to school at Miss Evison's Tabernacle and the Grammar School, all six of us. The pupils at Miss Evison's were mostly farmers' children up to the age of 10 and I think she instilled a sense of decency and regularity into most of us and we left with a fair knowledge of the three R's. The classroom was divided into two by a yellow curtain and there was always this background smell of burned coke and human bodies. There was an intriguing coloured print depicting "Pilgrim on the Straight and Narrow" – only the road had lots of hills and hair pin bends! Dear old Miss Evison! She, together with her sister, who kept house, was the unmarried daughters of a prosperous farmer from Wispington. I believe my father's eldest sister who was unmarried had run the school before them and they in turn handed over to Miss Rippin and then it went to the Miss Read's, daughters of old G.E. Read of Edlington. In 1996 it prospers as "Maypole House".

My grandfather Morton had been a sailor in his early days, (at sea at 10 and left with a Mate's certificate at 21, having been shipwrecked three times); but had then become a printer. He had prospered and adopted a way of life usual to



Pony and trap outside Lansdowne, 49 Spilsby Road, Horncastle

the late Victorians. So, on occasions the Bell tribe, or a suitable contingent, was escorted to The Elms, at that time quite an establishment in our eyes. Usually we were taken to the conservatory door and turned out into the garden, well away from the front door. But I did go in and well remember the large sword in the hall, but with no blood on it!

Grandpa was old and deaf, had a beard and was rather awesome. Granny Mary was his third wife and seemed very pleasant. She gave us homemade wine in small glasses. There was a croquet lawn, tennis lawn, kitchen garden and walled-in orchard with beautiful paved paths and espaliers. It was a wonderful place for plums. On the whole however we preferred the fields where there were cowslips, moles, mushrooms, fish, rabbits and poor little birds to be shot at with air guns.



The Waring River in "Crooks" field. Winifred Gaunt pictured left with Shirley, Tony and Jean Bell

In the late 1920s times became very hard. I think my father sometimes worried what would happen if he became ill. He owned the house and had a life policy for £750 and my mother had £250 from her mother. But we were all pretty healthy. Apart from childbirth, I think the doctor only came once, when we all had ringworm. My father did have a nasty bout of sciatica which did a bit at him. At that time we had a red couch in the sitting room and I recall quite a vivid shock when I opened the door and he was on this couch with his long pants and my mother rubbing white oils on his back. It seemed to cure him!

Apart from the doctor we were economical in many other ways. One had to be. (“Easy on the butter!” “Half a Banana”, “Pass-down the clothes.”). I recollect an uneasy feeling when being taken to Mrs Toynton’s second-hand clothes shop in South Street. We usually fed pretty well but from time to time had a “jour meigre” – boiled rice and golden syrup.

Bert Gaunt was a great friend of my father’s and there was “Crutty” Walter, brother of my father’s partner, (Staff Walter), Frank Gaunt, Percy Beal, Ted Harrison, Harry Hurdman all substantial farmers in the area; all with fairly big families. They all used to come to play tennis in the summer and they went shooting in the winter. The grown-ups had tennis parties in the weekdays, 3pm, with a tea interval. They came in Ford Model T’s and other period cars but the Beal’s came from Toynton by pony and trap and tied up outside the garage. Of course they all wore proper tennis togs with long dresses for the ladies who served under-arm. We fielded the balls and helped to mow the lawn by pulling. (There was no motor in those days!)



The Morton Family at The Elms, Horncastle.

Sometimes the Elsey's came to dinner at night with probably the Frank Gaunts and there they had hot roast pheasant etc and we all had to disperse. Capt. Elsey was a leading racehorse trainer and his people came from Baumber where at one time they had some 150 horses in training. It was said that half Horncastle used to go to Baumber on a Sunday morning and the champagne used to flow. Eventually they lost most of their wealth. Young Charlie (later the Capt. after returning from the war) was set up in Ayr and later Malton by an aunt. He was very nice to me and sent me his gun to shoot my first flying pigeon. Later on they came to the Farmers' Ball and we lads were instructed to give a duty dance to the daughter. She was really rather pretty then, dressed in a nice white frock and so John Drakes and I took it in turns. Years later I sent Robert for a years experience to Cundalls of Malton, her husband's business.

When I was small the Great War had not been over very long and we were used to hearing that Germans were bad. It was not surprising. Many young men from Horncastle had been killed or wounded in the trenches. Uncle Sidney (Morton) killed, Uncle Billy (Morton) gassed and never the same again. He had a bad time in the trenches. He was in the London Regt with the Scholeys, and somewhere I have his gruesome letters home to his sister, my mother. He had a deep raucous and humorous laugh. When I was going from Grimsby to the Officer Cadet Training Unit (OCTU) in 1940 they put me up for the night – luxury of a feather bed after 6 months on boards. But before turning in I quizzed him about the trenches and he told me all the details of how he had bayoneted a German and how he yelled and how they both fell over.....It wouldn't come out of his bones. Afterwards he thought the man meant to surrender but forgot to put his rifle down.

When I was ten I went to the Grammar School and of course I didn't much care for it. The first day a large boy called Bowland with brilliantine hair sat behind me and every so often stuck his pen nib in my rear. Then two more, about two forms above me used to set about me in the break. They used to tickle me between the legs and seemed greatly amused to conclude "they hadn't dropped yet". I didn't know what should have dropped – but they talked of goolies or some such word. The talk amongst the boys was flavoured in those days with words and phrases – more or less meaningless to me but with which I always felt a need to pretend I was quite conversant – such was the way of learning the facts of life. The Grammar School curriculum was in those days confined to fairly serious study. I always felt a bit of a dunce. I used to draw attention to myself by pretending to drink ink and such like silly things. I don't think I ever had a serious fight but we always wrestled with boys about our own age and I'm sure this gets your muscles up. The victory was when you had thrown your opponent and fastened him down helpless on his back.

I liked the football but was poor at cricket and so rarely got a chance to bat. I got on O.K. with the other boys and often used to cycle home with someone. The teachers were really very good at their job in those days. The headmaster, Mr Worman was austere, someone to revere. The fear of just being noticed was enough. Brown and Ismerwood were graduates of Nottingham University. Good middle class men – well spoken and well turned out – who taught what was

needed by way of maths, geography, woodwork and history. History was dull – dull and meaningless. The characters all seemed unreal. It never came to light until after the war. It is not an easy subject to get across to a class of children but I suppose they did drive a few dates into our heads.

My mother had been a school teacher for a few years at Miss Lunn's school for girls at Woodhall, where she had been a pupil and whence she returned after attending Aberystwyth University, as one of the very first lady pupils. Having been brought up in the strict Victorian code, regular church attendance, Sunday Constitutional thereafter etc. she seemed to rebel against the strict dogma; we were not entered into the church and confirmed like most of our age. We were sort of modern-day non-conformists. She was a good mother and a good wife. She had a wonderful memory, well educated, musical and very practical. Before I was sent to school she would play classical music on the piano and then break off to sing a folk song. It was she who organised training in poultry farming for Heather (who was strong but not academic) and subsequently they formed a partnership together. They had 600 free range hens running in the Lansdowne buildings and the paddocks. My father helped with huts etc. It was in the worst days of the depression and although there were tragedies with incubators, oil lamps, dogs, "coccidiosis" etc, they made ends meet and eventually the profits were, I believe, creamed off to send Tony and Shirley away to school at Lincoln.

She had studied Greek, Latin, Theology etc. and one book contained a phrase scored out and noted "Nonsense". It read "a wife is a young man's mistress, his companion in middle age and his nurse in old age". Once, sneaking through the desk, I was astonished to come across some of her love letters to my father. The language seemed silly and unbelievable. I could hardly believe it was her!

When we were small, she washed us and dressed us and took us to see ancient relatives such as Aunt Betsy Harrison in Conging Street. I remember a fairly stout little old lady with a black "choker" and I was persuaded to kiss her which I didn't like. She was born in 1838 and so was a teenager in the Crimea War! We also went to numerous children's parties where they played Frencha, postman's knock and sang "Poor Mary sits a weeping". I remember many of the boys and girls. We also went to dancing class where Miss Sedgeley started us off with dumb bells.

When Jean was 16 she was sent on family exchange to "Varaches" in the French Jura and we had Pierre le Mire, 17, and fourth in a family of seven. I think Jean had an innocent romance with one of the brothers and Pierre and Betty were great friends. Pierre was only 5' 1" but extremely extrovert and agile. We played lots of tennis in those days and he would somersault in the air on his way to the court. At Farmer Read's he showed off by tightrope walking the railings and then having a mock-up bull fight with the bullocks in the park. He is still remembered with affection after 60 years but unfortunately fell in the war.

The next year it was my turn and I spent seven weeks with the Navalet family at Mezieres en Brenne in the Loire Valley where I remember canoeing down the peaceful river with Philippe Navalet in a "real canoe". Eventually we came to a smart country house where they were having dinner outside on the lawn that

ran down to the river bank. Someone sent the car and next day we returned with the canoe on the roof.

The next summer I spent at Varaches, and then Shirley and Tony too and our families are still in touch from time to time. Shirley met up with Louis in New Orleans about 1985. Varaches was a lovely chateau on two levels. A fine old staircase led to a large panelled hall/landing where the posher meals were served (from a kitchen far away below). Behind was the terrace where they held target practice with all manner of pistols. There were six boys and one girl (Bijoux) the youngest. Without exception, they were small in stature but large in self opinion! What they lacked in brains they made up in muscle.

Oliver the eldest was 21, at St. Cyre. He could at that time pull himself off the ground with one hand, from a ring on the end of a rope, and then raise his whole body above the ring. In 1951 he commanded the French in Korea.

In 1930 when I was twelve and Tony ten, we were invited to Thimbleby Lodge to play with John and David Drakes who were about our age. Their father, Barry Drakes, was a farmer who had been in the Yeomanry in "Messpot" in the First World War and Mrs Drakes was the daughter of Mac Hall, a local Bank Manager and she had been at school with my mother.

From the first, we became buddies. Bird nests were visited, rivers and trees explored and various fairly innocent trespasses committed, all of which seemed exceedingly heroic at the time. The next year Mr Drakes gave up the big farm and they moved to Thimbleby House Farm and he became manager of an egg-collecting company. This new farm was more exciting for us because down the lane was Thimbleby Water Mill, where Old Fletcher operated. Old Fletcher we found, would tolerate boys, but only just! He had a sort of mumble, not helped by having a cigarette end hanging on his lower lip. We used to test his patience. There were eels to be caught and a mill-race is an interesting place for boys anyway. Soon we each had our own air gun. Mine cost 6/6d and was called "chug". Sometimes we camped out in a Bell-tent and had bacon and eggs for breakfast, cooked on a primus stove. The rain on the canvas tent made a particular smell and it all seemed wonderful and cosy. We used to talk a good deal about girls, and brag about what we'd do to them but only brag.

David was very good looking, forward and bright and after school he joined the R.A.F. and soon got promoted. He used to fly over the home and was his father's favourite. He married Barbara and had a son Philip and was lost over the sea in 1942.

John developed lung trouble at 18 and had one removed, but recovered and married Dorothy Grant and has one daughter, Angela. He has been a life-long friend.

My brother Tony was an outgoing, ingenious and mischievous lad. He was easy for me to handle as a boy because I was older but he could always throw stones further and straighter and could whistle and could tickle trout and was a good shot. He was always getting into trouble! Once he was nearly killed by Shirley with an axe, he stuck a manure fork through his foot and yelled like a pig when Jean threw a flint at the pear tree and it landed on his head! Later he was

shot in the war and in the shooting field. My sister Shirley, generally played with Tony and me down the fields. We went up the Crooks, a 40 acre green field with Bruce, the spaniel, and tried to scratch out rabbits. We lit sulphur down the hole to smoke them out but they never came.

At 14, realising I was backward, my mother organised extra Latin with Rev. W.D.O. Chapman at Thornton Rectory. It all seemed a bore but must have stimulated interest because I suddenly found I had passed the Cambridge Matric at 15 with six credits and so for one term I was in the 6th form, in the football team and Captain of House.

On 17th February, 1934 I commenced a year's pupilage with Alderman A.E. Dunham C.C. of High Toynton – no pay, free tuition. The men started at 6.30 but I was allowed to start at 8 which seemed plenty early enough for me, having to get my own breakfast and cycle one and a half miles. He had a good team of men and I was asked not to take sides. I was to work with them as directed and keep a diary.

Mr Dunham ("Booty" behind his back) was a very capable and straightforward man. What he believed in he carried out and what he thought he usually said. He did a lot of good work on the County Council, particularly with the Children's Homes. He brooked no nonsense and had a wry sense of humour. Altogether the sort of character needed to clean up the corruption and shuffling that takes the place, so often today, of Governments in this World!

He was a practical man, having started farming at 17 and so he knew the meaning of a fair day's work. There were 14 men on the farm and I was under the High Toynton Foreman, Head or Ed – I never did rightly get to know if it was Mr Head or Edward something but he was a decent chap and spoke with a most extraordinary accent, understood by all farm animals but with difficulty by me. When Mrs Major was accused of murdering her husband at Kirkby-on-Bain he told me he'd heard say she'd given him Strike Nine and another day he'd seen a Booda Rigger in the hedge (an escaped budgie!).

For three weeks I took my mare, a lovely kind black mare called Bess and chain harrowed the spring corn. One day Mr Dunham came to see me in Mill Hill and soon saw the brow-band out of place. He made the one mistake I ever saw him make; he loosed the butt – she cocked her eye – he tried to rectify – too late! I sprang aside and she was off and the harrows just missed his backside as he threw himself away!

He taught me many things. The different habits and noises made by the animals, especially pigs, the working of the land and how to balance rations, using albuminoid ratios. This way he made his own rations up. He pointed out how a gang of men will all stop when one stops, to light his pipe or blow his nose! He showed me how to destroy rubbish in the incinerator. We washed the bags and hung them on the yard fence. Many little practical things; I found it invaluable in the Army and farming and all my life.

I must mention Tom Padley. He was one of the men on the farm, quite young in those days. Tom had never learned to read or write and only just to speak but he could laugh and sing like a bird. Everyone in Horncastle knew Tom because

he sang all the way to work as he cycled along the streets. He couldn't remember very well, never learned to drive or work the horses, but a knocking and topping sugar beet on a frosty morning he could keep going all day. He finished his days doing garden work for me here at Mareham. He got by and lived a useful and satisfying life; but in these days he would have to be coddled and counselled and likely made into a Nothing. People were good to him, especially Townleys, the confectioners who gave him Sunday lunch in their warm bakehouse.

My year with Mr Dunham came to an end on 17th February 1935 and the next day I entered Old Bank Chambers as an articled pupil to Stafford Walter. Formal articles were prepared by Mr Tweed the Solicitor and duly executed. I was to learn the business but had to strictly behave myself and I was to get pocket money, 3/-, 5/- and 7/6 per week year by year. My father and I always walked to the office and then back for lunch. When we had to go on a journey, he had to wind up the car, which didn't always start and then there were fireworks. In the office there were at that time two partners, Hay Bell and Stafford Walter, Mr Wilf Hodson head clerk, Jack Evison and Goff Boulton, assistants and myself. The partners had their own rooms and the four of us used the L-shaped pine counter with its two raise-top "Charles Dickens" desks complete with ink well and curly wire pen holder! In winter, Mrs Dawson, the resident housekeeper lit the fires and when the door was closed it was nice and cheery. There were no filing cabinets in those days. Outgoing letters were copied in the letter press, and then put in the letter book which held 500 copies. There was a separate book for the Shire Horse Society, of which my father was secretary/treasurer. All incoming letters were three times folded, labelled and banded with patent quick-release tape (we still have one or two and they are far superior to any modern product).

Every other Thursday was stock market but rarely more than 20 or 30 sheep. On Saturdays we had a little produce market outside the office and there were pens of poultry, rabbits, ducks, potatoes, firewood, bedding plants, chicks etc etc along the roadway. "Shep" Howsam put the pens up and "did" the sale. He remembered who had brought what. People remembered in those days! He did all our sales, big and small; he could drive all forms of livestock, describe every implement, tool, or item of furniture. He knew everyone and everyone knew him. But he did smell. When the sale was over, he came for his money after boozing and full of chewing shag, but quite a character, no great beauty with his big red nose; his seven children looked just like him – I think they all did very well.

N.B. Sister Shirley's diary of 1940 goes: "The same people continue to flood the office on market day – 'Crutty' Walter smokes his way in and props up the mantelpiece. Alderman G. E. (Read) blows through the passage into R.H.B.'s room, despite all and sundry and sits down plomp, whether the said R.H.B. is engaged, on the telephone or what. The Reverend H. C. M. Spurrier sedately treads his entry. S and Co. dash in and gossip, Byron wheedles himself inside, etc., etc."

When my grandfather W.K. Morton died about 1935 the Horncastle News ran a special edition edged in black, devoted to his obituary and when my father died in 1969 the front page was devoted to him. My father was nearly 88 when

he died quietly in his sleep and it seemed to me that the whole community turned out to pay their respects and affection held for him by so many. He was a very straightforward man with a wonderful command of quiet wit and common sense. Taking no particular role in church matters, he was a Christian in the best sense of the word. From children to the elderly, he seemed to attract confidence by just being himself, "Hay Bell".*

When we were young, on a winter's night the whole family would gather round for Daddy to tell us a tale. It was all so wonderful that when he paused from time to time, there would be urgent voices call "Go on, Go on". Jackie the fox was one of the favourites. But on Thursdays he had to go to Council meetings and we would take turns reading Dickens, which was never quite the same.

Whenever we were challenged trespassing down the fields, it all came alright when we said who we were. Once, only once, he thrashed me with a little bamboo outside the garage for bullying Shirley. He was quick tempered when young – my mother called him a pepper pot – but always very fair. The only one time I didn't like him was when he scolded me for not speaking up. Then I would tend to clamp up altogether, but I suppose it made his point.

Opposite our house lived Mrs Parrish, a very stout widow with three children and she used to milk our cow when my father went out. Behind them lived an elderly couple, Joe Dennis and his wife. He was a fireman, joiner and market gardener. Down his garden was great interest, little paths, greenhouses, water butts, fruit trees. One day he came to the back door and asked my mother for help as he had sawn his fingers off. Tony and I of course went to see and there they were, all three of them, on the saw bench beside the blade.

Amongst the treasures in my father's desk was a clip of five 303 cartridges. They were fascinating things so one day Tony and I fastened a little metal vice to the gate, tightened up a cartridge in it and hit hard with a hammer. There was a great flash and a bang and some blood on my hand. It was pointing at the main Spilsby Road and we crept up to see if anyone was shot but all was well.

When I started in the office we used to do farm accounts and I had to stand and watch him write the figures out whilst he recited what he was doing. I was supposed to follow it all but of course I would go off dreaming and then the sparks



Robert Hay Bell (father) 1881 - 1969.

would fly. I got bored I remember but it didn't last and there were other things to do. Looking back, I must have taken something in because now in my semi retirement, they rather rely on me for our farm and estate accounts which I really enjoy doing.

In November 1936 Mr Walter died after an illness of some months. At the time, I was on a week's holiday with the Foucat family who lived in a small flat in the Boulevard St Italienne. I was 18 and their daughter was 16 but we were very shy. I spent each day on my own at the Louvre Versailles, Sacre Coeur etc. I remember sneaking up to the kiosk and buying a lewd journal and devouring it on the bus but that was as far as I went down mischief street! (on leaving Horncastle my father repeated, self consciously, a message from my mother – not to get involved with those French ladies!)

My father, or Pa, was great in every way. I was his partner for 23 years after the war and as a partner he was everything a partner could be. He had a wonderful little business. Farmers would come to him. "Ask Mr Bell" they would say. Business was all genuine in those days. He acted as land agent to the Hotchkins, Massingberd-Mundys, Maitlands, Morrisons and Ramsdens and could walk on lands under hand from The Witham to Ulceby Cross, apart from Horncastle Town. In the business he was faithfully supported by Mr Wilfred Hodson. Hodson, as he was always known to my father, came when he was 13 and had a little box to stand on behind the counter. Apart from being faithful and completely trustworthy, he was exceptionally quick and accurate with a wonderful memory. He cashed and balanced the sales first time, without having to have a carbon. It was recorded forthwith and practically no unpaids. He balanced all the books each year and prepared the office trading account and balance sheet. He had been known to take shorthand at 200 words a minute and type up to 100. He was a reporter to the Lincs Standard in between times and, as Council chairman for 10 years, was known as Mr Horncastle! He was with us until he sadly lost his memory in old age. He was a product of the Victorians who could have gone right to the top had he wished.

There were many characters about in those days, such as Dodger Brackenbury, Weary Bradley, Screw Belton, odd job men and such. Jimmy Mullins had a squeaky voice and only stood 4'6" but helped at sales. Nell Lowe kept the lodging house in Church Lane (1/- a night) and of course there were the tramps. After the 1st War you would see them regularly tramping the roads. Although we didn't know it at the time, they probably included many ex-service men. The last one I remember was Jim Croft. He often slept in a broken down cottage at Woodhall. He had been shell shocked and never regained his confidence. His family are farmers and freeholders and did what they could for him.

When I first started in the office I was set a syllabus of two or three correspondence papers each week and I retired to my room for 2-4 hours most nights and also at weekends. It took me that time to grasp the subject, make the notes and answer the questions. So I had no cricket, football, hockey, but just tennis and the occasional dance. I missed out a good deal. However I was always interested in a) money matters, b) my work and c) girls or rather the romance that seemed to be associated with girls.

As regards money matters, like Mr Pepys I used to keep a little record of my cash coming in and out. It came in pennies and shillings from ducks and bees and my 3/6d and it went on sweets, tobacco and dances. There were hockey dances at about 5/- a time in the Masonic Hall where we had a super three-piece band – Stanley Bogg, piano; Boothroyd saxophone and a violin. I saved up £7.7.0 and bought a tailor-made evening dress complete with white tie. With my father's new Rover 12 and sporting a trilby and white silk scarf I felt quite a dog!

The attitude to sex in those days was a mixture of excitement and romance, rather than this 1990s present day approach. No doubt there were some who went the whole way but the general thinking was that the fellows took the lead and it would be pretty rotten and insulting to a girl to suggest any real looseness outside marriage. There was a feeling of anticipation on going to a dance and looking who was there and indeed there was a bit of holding hands and kissing and cuddling but that was about all it was expected to be and indeed about all it was until it became a matter of an engagement.

Jean, two years older than me, was in those days very lively and attracted lots of admirers. Once she persuaded me to take her to a hop at the Winter Gardens at Woodhall, late at night, in the new Rover car. Very quietly, when they'd all gone to bed, we sneaked out in bottom gear, and thought we were very clever. Actually it all went wrong because her beau of the moment would dance with someone else and next day at lunch a friend of my father casually mentioned that he had enjoyed meeting his son and daughter at Woodhall the night before!

Shirley was at Lincoln High School and used to bring lots of girlfriends home. She was always very popular and many of them have kept up a wonderful friendship throughout life. There was Cynthia Henton (currently near Shirley in Australia), Joyce Street, the Barclay sisters, Betty Kaye, and a rather fast Bank Manager's daughter. We often went to parties as teenagers, sometimes dancing at the coast. At the coast we often met our cousins, the Fred Morton's from Sleaford who took a house there.

CHAPTER TWO

The war years hold many memories. We went off and marched and trained and thought no one was quite like the Infantry. I was about 19, beavering away in the office when the Lincoln's marched through the town behind the band. I saw them over the top of the frosted glass window. The Éclat! The nonchalant air of the subalterns – swagger sticks horizontal, leading the platoons, rank on rank at the slope in perfect unison. Surely here was a body that would go steadily through anything!

Training

In the mid thirties we all became aware of unpleasantness brewing up in Germany. The ramping speeches by Hitler were what made us aware. We often went to the “pictures”. We saw the adverts, the roaring lion, the main film and the news. Leaving the League of Nations, pick and shovel armies, going into the Rhine, then later came Austria, Czechoslovakia. By the spring of 1939 it was obvious we were on the brink and I went one night with Gordon Spratt and signed up in the local Territorials for four years or the duration. I was 21. Tony, Charlie Spratt, John Gaunt, Jack Wynn and Jack Reay from Lloyds Bank and Harry Hudson joined a week or two later and we were formed into one section. It was 1939 and the clouds of war came all too soon. The Territorial Army was expanding fast. One had to do something.

I had passed my finals (much to my surprise coming 4th in the U.K.) and wondered if this would help to become an officer. Alex Greenwood told me the thing to do was to get to be a Captain before the war because then you'd be promoted and wouldn't have to go over the top! Eight of us were companions in arms in what quickly became a rifle company of some 90 local men, commanded by Lt. Reg Tweed, the local solicitor who had nursed the platoon along since 1918 or so. The corporals soon became sergeants and Sgt. Gussing became the Sgt. Major with a crown on his lower sleeve.* There was great enthusiasm, all of us being volunteers.

By the summer I found I'd also passed my Chartered Surveyors Intermediate exam. I was fit and strong and we went to camp at Douglas, Isle of Man. Beer was drunk in the train on the way and I remember (to my present day humiliation) how we pelted empty beer bottles at the telegraph poles as we sped by. We disembarked and were marched three miles to Bilbao Camp and lived in bell tents, eight to a tent. It was on a hillside and my place was downhill so I slept (first night) with my head uphill – against 14 feet!

N.B.: Structure of the British Army

<i>Unit</i>	<i>Typical Numbers</i>	<i>Commander</i>
<i>Section</i>	<i>8 or more</i>	<i>Sergeant</i>
<i>Platoon</i>	<i>15-30</i>	<i>Lieutenant</i>
<i>Company</i>	<i>80-150</i>	<i>Captain/Major</i>
<i>Battalion</i>	<i>300-800</i>	<i>Lieutenant Colonel</i>
<i>Brigade/Regiment</i>	<i>2,000-4,000</i>	<i>Colonel/Brigadier</i>
<i>Division</i>	<i>10,000-15,000</i>	<i>Major General</i>
<i>Corps</i>	<i>20,000-40,000</i>	<i>Lieutenant General</i>
<i>Army</i>	<i>Over 80,000</i>	<i>General</i>
<i>Army Group</i>	<i>Several Armies</i>	<i>Field Marshall</i>

We had a brigade which is about 3000 men and when we were all formed up with our uniforms and bayonets, the Adjutant came forward on horseback and shouted words of command. I distinctly remember a feeling of euphoria, seeing such potential power in a great body of men. It must be something like the bees feel when they swarm.

As I sit here in the sunshine at Bonne Nuit Bay in Jersey, as an old Daddy, I try to recall life in the ranks at the age of 21. There was plenty of marching, drilling, inspection of kit, arms, barracks and bodies. I found I had to concentrate hard to get by. There's always a butt of any squad and I tried my best to avoid this distinction, which was eventually claimed by poor Teddy Pearce. One morning the Cpl. called out "who's left the basin dirty" and of course someone replied "Teddy Pearce" who immediately replied "No, it wasn't me because I haven't washed this morning". This hasty reply brought trouble for poor Teddy who was there and then washed all over! Another time poor Teddy was in trouble when the air raid warning went and it was discovered he had lost his tin hat. Spratt never failed to relate how a keen soldier called Bell had one on his head and another on his shoulder strap!

When not on guard duty, we often drifted to the Oswald, the liveliest pub in town (no doubt owned by the same Lord Oswald to whom, years later, I sold Ruckland Estate) and there was great merriment. To the tune of Roll out the Barrel and Run Rabbit Run or Down Mexico Way, soldiers drank and sang and chatted to the girls.

Every dog has its day and I suppose every generation has its own music. In the 1930s there existed song masters who invented songs that went to a particular tune and once you'd got them off together, you could sing and whistle away – and of course dance. Tunes like 'Always', 'Red Sails in the Sunset', 'Smoke gets in your eyes', 'Donkey serenade', 'Lets all sing like the birdies sing', 'Dinah', 'Peggy O'Neil' etc. The Top Ten today seem to put on endless tapes but we never seem to hear the words. But my day was then – the saxophone could be very rousing.

Back to the war – the phoney war. The German Panzer divisions had carved up most of central Europe and were about to compact a deal with Stalin over Poland. France and the U.K. had declared war and we were at war. My mother wrote to each of us every week the whole of the war and she also sent me the "Times Supplement" which outlined the world's happenings and I remember the record of all the ships that were being sunk – thousands of tons each week. Otherwise there was an ominous quiet. At the end of November 1939 there was news that Finland was about to be invaded by Russia. As a battalion we were put on stand-by and issued with extra boots but by the time the arctic clothes arrived, it was all over – fait accompli, and we all stood down again. So more training and standing guard, Tests of Elementary Training and we became fairly good. We could, or some of us could, assemble a Bren gun blindfold and I think I was known at one time as 15 seconds Bell! We were fit and we were keen but I do remember – it was one morning when it fell to me to sweep the stairs-wondering how long all this hum-drum was going to last.

As things turned out, it was shortly after this that I was sent for by the Captain and asked if I would take on being Lance-Corporal, unpaid. This was no doubt

about the proudest time of my life and I kept glancing down to make sure my stripe was still there! I didn't have much to do as Lance Corporal and I think I felt a bit uneasy because there were better men than me and I remember having trouble with one, Wag Mail, who came in late and drunk.

Christmas came and we had a week's leave. It was great, shooting somewhere every day. On the Thursday it was Horncastle Fat Stock Show and I was asked to sell the champion bullock. It belonged to G.B. Read and made £32. Everyone fussed us up and made us feel good. When we returned to Ripon, where we had been for the previous month or so, my sister gave us a goose which we had cooked by the good Mrs Passmore at the Pub next to our barracks. The eight of us in our section had soldiered together since April and we ate it up and became known as the "Goose Gang". There had never been a tiff between any of us but the day of parting was not far off.

John Gaunt, our corporal, was promoted to Warrant Officer to command another platoon. Gordon Spratt and I were called one day to Captain Tweed and asked if we would like our names to go forward for OCTU. This news was very exciting and I couldn't really believe my luck.

Anyway, off we went, Gordon and I to Blenheim Barracks, Farnborough under Capt. Jackson "A" Company, and several Sgt. Instructors, to be put through a four month crash course. The tuition was first class. We were so very keen and this new life opened up completely fresh horizons. I had had experience in professional examinations and found I could cope with the practical. It was great. We ate awful porridge for breakfast and were thrilled by Vera Lynn singing "Oh Johnnie - How you can love". We wore coloured bands in our hats,



Selling G.B. Read's Champion Bullock at Horncastle Fat Stock Show.

signifying Officer Cadet, and felt good and courageous when we saw the young life of Aldershot! I palled up at this time with Jim Howsam who used to tell me all about Joan (whom he married in due course and who produced him four daughters) and he used to tease me for being a virgin. He even pointed out two likely females walking in the park but they looked so gross and powerful that I returned innocent to barracks!

It was during the early part of this course that Hitler sent his men to Norway, 10th April, and shortly afterwards we learned that our old Regt. 4 Lincolns including my brother Tony had gone to contend.

I remember Gordon and I felt bad, being at OCTU whilst our pals were fighting. In a week or two the news became grim. It was later that we discovered our fellows were beaten out of it, mainly because of air superiority. Jack Wynn and seven others were taken prisoner. Tony had great excitement, got parted, trekked nearly to Sweden, joined up again, to be dive bombed in the ships on the way home.

Then on 10th May, as we came in from our exercise, we heard the news on the B.B.C. British troops had joined with the French in the advance into Belgium. Exciting stuff, but the Germans seemed to be attacking at the same time. The next day things were O.K. but the talk was more of holding them up. I think it was the next day that Churchill took over from Chamberlain. The Germans were everywhere, all over us.

We had our lectures, did night ops across the Basingstoke Canal (I even swam/waded it naked and met this adjudicating officer on the far bank), but Hitler's young men were cock a hoop. The French and British were split. All we knew was that we were suddenly taken off our course and put to work preparing a camp for those returning from Dunkirk. We put up bell tents in a field and they came in trucks, all looking pretty washed up.

That was early June. Our course finished in early August. That summer was gloriously hot and the Surrey countryside seemed so beautiful and peaceful. One day Gordon and I went to the village of Elstead and had tea with Miss Bryce Smith, whose father had been Rector of Hameringham. She took a photo which is still around. We both looked very young in her nice garden.

Another Lincolnshire cadet was the mischievous Eric Dring. He was a great practical joker and was poking fun all day long. In the most serious lectures he'd been seen to "get the cards out" below his desk. One day the King was to inspect us. We pondered what we would say if the King stopped to talk to us. Eric stated "I shall just say "Hiya King"! Sure enough, there we all were, spruced up to the hilt ready for the Brass Hats. You were supposed to fix your stare horizontally at a point 200 yards away, but Eric's face seemed to hold a perpetual impish grim which was no doubt why the King chose to halt and enter into a deep conversation with Eric! Next day the tabloids had Eric and the King on half the front page! Eric was a year or two younger than most of us and when the course was over, he had the mortification of having to stay on a bit longer, but he eventually passed out and spent a very mysterious war keeping the general staff in order somewhere

out East! He is now a large successful farmer/landowner and has a son in law about as impish as himself!

As Officer Cadets, we were expected to turn out just a little bit smarter than in the ranks, and to this end were drilled by special staff sergeants from the smarter Regular Regiments. From time to time we were chosen in turn to take their place. We were taught to bawl commands at our friends from a great distance, to double, crawl, swim, jump and to study tactics, theory of warfare, military history, jurisdiction, call of troops, health and hygiene etc. Experienced officers did their best to give us some idea of what to expect. Hints were given on how to get the best out of your men, especially about seeing them fed before yourself. Discipline was strict but not severe. It had no need to be – we were all too keen. Very few were returned to unit. All in all it was a good sensible course.

Passing Out day eventually came and with it great to-do! I found myself responsible for paying the bill for the broken glass (thrown to the floor and stamped on as the toasts were drunk).

Capt. Jackson the Company Commander had been regarded as something high up amongst the Gods – but that night he descended to drink with mortals, and not only that but sang a song about a poor maiden to which we chorused something about “Pinkity Pink”. It was all great, and so was a week’s leave, when Shirley came up with a lovely looking 16 year old. Of course we thought we were in love and wrote for a year or so but she then married a curate!

I had opted for the County Regiment, (The Lincolns) and was in fact commissioned thereto but immediately posted on secondment to the 9th Foot, The Royal Norfolks. It was a regiment divided into companies, each guarding an airfield; mine was Feltwell and Spratt was at Mildenhall. Lord Walsingham was Commanding Officer. The station was a bomber station with Blenheims. Young Air Force officers were chosen from the cream of the Country’s youth. They were extremely fit, full of spirit and fine looking. They had wonderful quarters and mess. They were on serious ops. that autumn of 1940, the Battle of Britain as they call it now, but at that time I just remember there were many days when chaps over Germany the night before didn’t turn up for breakfast. It was always at night for them. The Blenheims were not so modern. They would take me up for a fly around and put the wind up us chaps in Khaki. On Sundays they had a band after lunch playing the latest airs and often at night we would all go to a pub and have a sing song. One night I suddenly woke up with a start, having thrown myself off my camp bed whilst still asleep as a strike of bombs went across the airfield.

But my job was very routine and when a note came round asking for volunteers to serve somewhere out East I put my name down. That of course was another change in my life because after some time, I found myself in London on embarkation leave for somewhere overseas, I knew not where. There were several of us and we stayed at a hotel in the Marylebone Road and the Blitz was on. Searchlights and banging all night but the thing was that I chummed up with four or five fellows and we had no duties and so we ambled down to Simpsons in the Strand for a pre-lunch drink. Good company – blitz or no blitz. At Simpsons in those days you could get your shoes and Sam Brown polished

up, shaved – someone even had a manicure. I remember Pongo Dawson, son of a farmer Pongo, a super young chap, full of it. I remember we all got merry and some of them fell in with some young ladies at the bar – and Pongo told us a bit of a précis about it all next day, much to the amusement of Hayward. Hayward was a bit older than the rest of us, and of course knew everything about everything. He had a Bisley marksman's rifle which I bought from him for £10 and had it all the war. It had special aperture sights and nine other refinements but was otherwise like a Lee Enfield. (Years later, in the excitement of it all, I shot at a man but forgot to extend the backsight aperture, and I saw him duck.) As we approached Cape Town Hayward warned us all to be careful as a girl might be perfectly white but when she took you home, she might have parents “as black as the ace of spades”! He was that sort of chap – really very nice – he said it all with the best humour – nothing he didn't know. Then there was Henry Willis; an exceptionally good looking young man, extraordinary fresh complexion. From a good family in Hertfordshire. A real man. We stood together in Nairobi when they called Regiments. Somehow Henry got in the line for the Gold Coast and I got in the Nigerian Regiment. It had to be decided more or less in a flash – a parting of the ways. Poor old Henry got killed somewhere in South Abyssinia – stripped and mutilated – I should think he put up a good fight.

For three days out of Glasgow the October Atlantic made most of us sea sick, but what I most recall is the sight out of the porthole of the awesome expanse of deep grey sea – just like the picture of a ship wreck scene that used to hang in our bedroom – best not to imagine too deeply. It was the Winchester Castle taking 400 officers out to Kenya via Cape Town. What luxury in the middle of the war! Once away from the North Atlantic, it was a lovely cruise through the tropics; we saw flying fish, played deck quoits, ate eight course dinners and played Old Father Time going over the line and the company was good. The first sight of land at Freetown in West Africa, a low line gradually developing into what must be tropical jungle made you imagine what the ancient mariners felt as they struck such parts. After a wonderful welcome by a nice family in Cape Town (Table Mountain and Cape Rollers, all as forecast by Hayward) we transhipped to the “Khedive Castle” bound for Mombasa.

After Freetown, we saw no aircraft, friendly or otherwise and the convoy escort was mostly withdrawn. It had been a great comfort to see these nonchalant looking destroyers and cruisers calmly moving over those stormy waters. There had been many hair-raising stories of fellows getting ditched and turning up the other side of the world in a little boat. I always felt I'd never know which way to try and go – the ocean was so vast!

When we tied up at Mombasa, the black men seemed to swarm over the dockyard cheerfully gabbling away. The impression was definite and immediate – we had arrived in Africa!

CHAPTER THREE

Africa

I bought a pineapple at Mombasa Station and we shared it in the train – juice all over the floor. In those days you left Mombasa at 4pm and arrived at Nairobi at 8am next morning after the luxury of a sleeper; but the wonderful thing about that journey was waking up at dawn (always 6am on the Equator) and seeing the herds of game grazing on the plains. The railway line was a single track laid by Indian coolies about 1906. They had terrible trouble early on with man-eating lions (fully explained by Hayward of course), but eventually they got it all completed with wonderful twists and turns, bridges and steeps where you have two engines and the picaninnies run beside the train.

By 1940 Kenya had been British some 50 years and the administration had many doors open to bright public school boys. Apart from the police, law, public health, etc. District Officers or Commissioners worked under the Governor and had a number of A.D.O's. (assistant D.O.) to help them. These people provided a background for law and order throughout an area about the size of the U.K. I suppose there would be about six or eight D.C's. and 50 odd District Officers (assistants). The white people were mostly farming in the Rift Valley White Highlands but there were traders and hotels and shops in Nairobi, which contained about 6000 people, including several Asians, the descendants of the railway workers. Otherwise the country was much as it was in Anno Domini. The natives lived in their villages in huts of earth and thatch, grew maize and kept hump-backed cattle and goats and left most of the work to the women. They ate posho – maize meal and looked for meat about once a month.

From this background came my orderly or personal servant "Ngara" from Fort Hall, a little town, 40 miles away.



We were instructed, each of us, to choose a youth from the several who paraded in a line. I chose "Ngara" and he was a good, modest and faithful servant, enlisted as an official camp follower and put his thumb on a paper and I signed it. He followed the camp, making my valise bag, washing and ironing my clothes all the way to Addis Ababa. He was shot through the thigh and I never saw him after that. But it was a flesh wound and he would no doubt recover. In addition to his posho he was paid 5/- a month.

At Base Details camp just outside Nairobi we were put on three hours standby to join our various regiments. The days came and went and nothing happened. One night I went out with some fellows in a taxi to some boozing place and fell into a trap that ensnares many young people. I mixed my drinks and before I knew properly what I was drinking, I had obviously imbibed some terrible potent brew for the next thing I remembered was waking up on my camp bed with a terrible head and blood all over from some gash. I was really pretty ashamed. It was said I had been fighting but I never had the slightest recollection of that. I resolved never to do that again and up to now have kept my resolve.

I seem to have been fairly irresponsible at that time and perhaps it was the sort of holiday atmosphere produced by the pleasure cruise, for the next thing was that I went off game shooting with Hayward and missed the draft. So I arrived at Lamu to join the second battalion a few days after the others. To get to Lamu from Nairobi meant a train to Mombasa and then a sea trip of about 80 miles in a Dhow (a sort of native sailing boat which ply the coast as far as the Persian Gulf). Very picturesque it was, to be carried off the boat on the shoulders of a burly African.

Lamu is a tropical island just off the coast of Kenya. Although big ships have to stand off in deep water, Dhows and small craft have used Lamu through the ages. Inland, it is very sandy with lots of coconut palms and herds of goats. The town of Lamu is in the north of the small island and has the remains of an ancient mosque. I was allocated a fine stone or concrete house overlooking the Indian Ocean, said to have been an Arab establishment. There were date palms in the garden and a sort of farmyard behind where the goats were herded at night. One of my first jobs was to sort out a complaint made by the goat farmer concerning the activities between my troops and his goats. I had heard lots of bleating at night but could not understand what it was all about. Eventually my African Sgt. explained it all in a few basic words! We got it stopped.

When the sun dropped down a little, the aspect over the Indian Ocean through the palm trees was really exquisite.

At that time the British Empire stood alone against the Germans and Italians. As Italy occupied the whole of Libya, Abyssinia and Somaliland, we had plenty to go at. The frontier was about 100 miles to the north and we had various outposts here and there, like Moyale and Afmadu and I used to hear the regular officers who had been in the area some time, talking about these various places and projecting the probable action and it all sounded mysterious and exciting. I should say that in the battalion of 1000 men from North Nigeria, which garrisoned Lamu, we had some 40 European officers and 18 warrant officers.

Out of the officers, ten were regulars, ten Rhodesian subalterns and the rest of us “Imperials”.

The Commanding Officer was Col. Hopkins (Hoppy) and my Co. Commander was Capt. Tom Gibbons of the Welsh Regt. The Adjt. was Capt. Barrow and it was to him I had to report on my tardy arrival. There were two of us, a Sergeant and myself, and we were ushered into the anti-room to wait. There was a bamboo partition dividing the C.O's. office off and a conversation was taking place and I just caught something about “jump on them Barrow!” and before long.....we were jumped on!

The Royal West African Frontier Force comprised Regiments of native Africans recruited in the British West African colonies and were formed into Infantry Battalions – Nigerians, Gold Coast and Sierra Leone Regiments. I think eight or ten Battalions in all. Second Nigerian Regiment were recruited in N. Nigeria, H.Q. at Kano, but some came from Maiduguri, Banana tribe, Fort Lamy etc. They loved the drill and were said to be up to Guards standard. They wore blue woolly jerseys for early parade, with a white belt and it was good to see 300-400 drilling to perfect harmony. Many were Muslims, some C of E, several C of S and the rest P for pagan. They chatted happily in Hausa which we had to learn. Many had facial scribes and some had ruined their teeth by filing to a point. Most of the Muslims shaved their heads, often dry with a piece of glass or such. This must have been very painful but was done with stoic resignation.

My platoon was drawn up four deep for my inspection by Sgt. Sambo Lai, a wonderful example of all you could wish for. Of mature years compared with the men, his face and bearing comprised all that was military and his voice was deep and penetrating.

Each night we had certain sentry posts to man and I used to visit these on foot. One post was a mile or two away and the route lay along the sea shore. Myriads of tiny creatures bolted about on the wet sand and some were phosphorescent. In other parts of the coast there were mangrove swamps where everything was dark, impenetrable and stagnant. Often dawn was breaking as I returned from my rounds. Occasionally I would see odd figures in black habits sneaking out of the lines towards the village! Sometimes we had dawn bathing parade when we all joined in officers and men as God originally made us but it came to an end because it was said the local maidens were embarrassed! We worked extremely hard in Lamu, fortifying the place against attack. Dannert wire was everywhere. It was brutally sharp and rusty and we got very scratched. One man got blood poisoning and died and I myself had my right arm swollen up to the armpit but the Med. Off. got it right. It was here I earned my native nick-name, “Mai Aoki” – owner of work!

One other memory of Lamu – we would see the dhows coming in from the northern horizon. After a six-month trip, it must have been a joy to return for they struck up a band of some sort as they rounded the headland and sailed into home waters. It was wonderful to watch – a journey backwards in time, with no concern about the war.

On the Move

About Christmas time (1940) most of our officers went on leave to Nairobi or somewhere. Some had wives there. Something was afoot. At one stage I was left in sole charge of H.Q. Co. making arrangements for a move. I was very busy with the detail of this and that, lorries, baggage, etc. About New Years day we got into 30 cwt lorries and made off. This preliminary advance was a series of jogging along in convoy, with frequent unexplained stops over dusty uneven tracks, till we reached the general forming up place, Bura, close to the frontier. On the way I had stopped to shoot an antelope and when we proceeded (with most of the



Divisional Transport queued up on us) we came to a parting of the way and I had to take a snap decision, but luck was in!

Bura was just part of the bush – endless bush, and was full of troops of men, lorries, tanks, camp fires, trenches and latrines. The word went round for volunteer officers to patrol forward on motor cycles spotting land mines but I heard no more about it (thank goodness).

The advance began and was pretty tiring and routine. My platoon was always sent ahead of the Company with the task of preparing a defensive box for the night. We were to be on tinned meat and veg. and bully beef and biscuit for the next five months and, apart from two days, on a strict eight pints of water. Although we found it hard and grumbled and had little fights over the water, it always arrived at night and you could hear the men of the RASC pouring it into huge canvas tanks.

Every camp site held a unique and intimate detail for me in that I had to note every detail of cover, undulation, field of fire. At the time I thought I should remember this detail for all time but of course it all gets blurred. We advanced several days and got into enemy country. Eventually we noticed extra stops, speeding despatch riders and then sure enough the sound of shooting. We were at the River Jubba. My troops were not involved but I remember stalking warily into the bush with my pistol ready, but most of them had run for it. It was about this time that a very excited Brigadier, by name Richards (nick-named Piggy) cut me across the backside with his cane because he was frustrated about the traffic and I was the first officer he could find. He wanted to get the tanks through. The endless advance continued day after day through scrub land, fairly flat, then bushes, sand and the occasional tree but no sign of habitation whatever. I think we bye-passed some settlements and later on we went straight through a village of mud and straw huts all burnt out. With the water ration, came maps scaling ½” to 1 mile and these showed various tracks as dotted lines. The Italian Army was in full retreat and put up little resistance, but at the time we wondered where we would finish up! After seven or eight weeks of minor skirmishes, we were approaching the enemy's capital of Somaliland, Mogadishu.

It was the spring of 1941. The war had been going nearly two years and up to now the German forces were in complete control. After Austria and Czechoslovakia, they had beaten up Poland in 1939, Norway and France in 1940. Central and Eastern Europe trembled and nearer to us, we had evacuated British Somaliland to the Italians.

Dirty, tired and thirsty, we found ourselves hundreds of miles inside enemy country and had qualms, but we were young, and in the army you live from day to day and – Bravo! Here we were on the outskirts of Mogadishu.

It appeared over my right shoulder as I sat in the cab – a sudden sighting of red roofs down in the valley against the blaze of tropical sun and the blue Indian Ocean. It really did seem like the Promised Land!

The enemy had withdrawn and we were to have a victory parade next day and I was to take part. Next morning we spruced up as best we could and set off down the hill towards the wonderful enchanting groves of oranges and lemons.

But, bad luck. Capt. Barrow suddenly appeared and I had to drop the parade and instead take charge of the Italian paymaster.

In Mogadishu there were many nice white villas, although the city had its East End. I spent 24 hours there. I remember a huge dump of fuel, partly burned out, the blue Indian Ocean in the brilliant sunshine, a lonely walk in the poor quarter with my 45 colt at the ready, the irrigated groves of citrus and the wine store, a sight for sore eyes. It was huge, with cases of all manner of exotic spirits and wine stacks right to the very high ceiling. The Colonel very seriously gave every officer permission to take two bottles at choice and the rest remained under strict guard. I chose a bottle of Benedictine and one of Kummel. The Benedictine lasted me, sip by sip, to Addis Ababa!

We soon moved on but were no longer in the lead. For several days we travelled north along a concrete road in the blazing sun. After a hundred miles or two of cultivated and semi populated country with occasional water, we struck the Somali Desert. Beled Weyne was where we saw the last water for 500 miles. The enemy was on the run. All we knew was that we were going forward, day after day, in the tropical sun on eight pints a day. Sassabau, Dagabur, Jig Jigga were taken and passed through. At Dagabur two Italian Fiat fighters came and straffed us. We shot back with Bren guns. Suddenly two Hurricanes appeared and they had this dog fight right overhead and quite low. Empty shell cases rained down. Our chaps were much faster; they swooped down and came up from under and we saw the tracer go in. Suddenly one of the Fiats began to smoke; then it came right low over our heads, rose, stalled and crashed in flames in our lines. The second one was also hit and went off trailing smoke. Suddenly it rose like a towering partridge; a tiny speck appeared as the pilot jumped out. It looked a mile away so I ran across the bush/desert. When I arrived, two S. African officers had beaten me to it and had him in between them as a big Nigerian charged with fixed bayonet right at the pilot who nimbly sidestepped just like a matador. On the way in we talked a bit in pigeon French and I must say our prisoner was extraordinarily self-possessed and cocky.

The road was endless. There were stretches on concrete with fascines at 5km intervals and then miles of just sand. Occasionally there would be a table-top tree. If we stopped here that's where I used to put battalion H.Q. for I used to go in advance of our battalion and prepare a suitable site for the night.

Ahead of us were bits of rear guard skirmishes as witnessed by burning transport, occasional casualty and armour. One lorry we found had lots of sugar in 16 st. sacks and another had barrels of oil. We had to be strict about looting. In one fortnight we averaged 58 miles a day and then we saw a mountain range in the distance. This was Abyssinia, the ancient inland kingdom. It brought up thoughts of Rider Haggard and King Solomon's mines. Mussolini had made himself very unpopular marching in six years back, (when the Emperor Haile Selassie fled to England).

Abyssinia

The column came to a halt and we could see the mountain range eight or ten miles away across a sloping valley with the village of Jig Jigga at the bottom.

Our fellows were probing about, trying to find a way round. We stopped here for four or five days. We could see the shells bursting on the hillside opposite. There were rumours of this and that, and that we were going to attack. At this point I was detached with my platoon to hold a certain spot at all costs. We pushed forward towards Marda's left Breast and located our position and I disposed the men.

Here, I regret to mention a little episode which I have often thought typified an unfortunate attitude – an attitude that seemed to creep into the forces – an attitude of *laissez faire* – the passing over of wrongs – avoidance of the final confrontation. I had 30 Africans and one European Sgt. and I placed one section under him whilst I took charge of the rest in front. We were ready for anything that might come but nothing came except a very cold night. Runner after runner was sent off for orders (or at least blankets) but never returned. About midnight I sent a man to get news of my Sgt. and was stupefied to learn he was no longer there. His orders had been as clear as mine! Towards dawn there had come orders to return to H.Q. The Sgt. had taken it on himself to do so!

I remonstrated to the Capt. (Gibbons was a regular officer, rather fat and liked his comforts!). I suggested reporting to the Colonel but nothing was done. I had read of Mustapha Kemel shooting three colonels who had not been brave and I was angry. However nothing was done. I did however finish the advance without the services of that particular Sgt. In after years I thought about this episode in connection with Singapore – but I will not comment.

When you come over Greetham crossroads towards High Toynton, you see the gentle slope down to Horncastle and the rise to Thimbleby in the scenic distance. Transpose our Thimbleby/Langton ridge with a mountain range and you have the panorama. The skyline presented crags and dips and in particular two rounded prominences – soon christened Marda's left (and right) breast. Somewhere between the two, in the scrub woodland, is the Marda Pass and this was our objective. My unit was in reserve and we only saw the gun strikes and heard of so and so getting the immediate M.C. and then we were on our way – up, up round the bend, up again and eventually over the top and there in the distance, perhaps 12 miles away were red roofs, surely a city, yes, it was the ancient provincial city of Harrar. There were several people about as we drove through the streets, mostly young men and they seemed neither jubilant nor terrified. There had obviously been disorder and looting. One street was almost blue all over. Someone investigated this curiosity and it seemed that the local brothel had been ransacked!

Rumour had it the enemy was fleeing as fast as possible and so it was full steam ahead for Addis, the capital. We were now on the plateau 7000 ft up. We had come from "Athens to London" with our objective, Addis, like Carlisle. It was 1st March 1941 when we left Mogadishu and now it was about 24th and very cold. The S. Africans now took the lead and we followed close. I was sent with a truck and a section of men to collect a load of arms at the Town Hall in Dere Dawa. There was a butcher's stall on the side of the market place and it was fascinating to see the sudden change of colour from black to red and red to black as the butcher took the cover away to serve a customer!

We got most of the rifles and ammunition loaded but then the locals began to get more and more interested and started snatching at things. For a time we stood our ground by shouting, but then things went ugly. The whole square became a seething mass of excited Habbash. Something had to be done and done pretty quickly. I got the corporal and driver together and arranged that on a signal all the men would fall in line, slope arms, present arms and come to the "On Guard" position with bayonets fixed and then quickly jump on board and away. It worked like a charm! In a flash half the square seemed empty and we thankfully sped away.

On 1st April, we entered the capital Addis Ababa which had fallen to the S. Africans the day before. I remember steep streets, mostly narrow, and I remember the youths with pockets full of Omega and Longines watches, and Leica cameras which they offered us for £1 but generally we spent our field allowance on onions, eggs and melons. What was the use of a second watch? After three months on tinned food an onion was a treat from heaven.

I was pretty fit but like many others, I found three months of it had removed the stuffing and I went sick with fever. So I was sent to a hospital run by three or four Italian Roman Catholic Nuns. They acted as doctor, nurse and dogs body and put me in a room with three other men. I passed water green as grass and began to wonder! The three men were Italian Air Force officers. Was I being quietly put down? But no, I soon recovered and we all got on well speaking French. They said one of them had been navigator in the savoyan bomber which bombed us at Sarabani and which I shot at with the Bren. He told me it was hit and one man killed.

On the approach to Addis Ababa our company had billeted in a rather nice house, obviously abandoned by a well to do Italian family. They had fled in a hurry and left a fine silver tea service, which we used to our great joy and comfort. As we turned in, Tom Gibbons, the Company Commander said to me make sure we take that silver tea service. Well, I didn't want to take it along and although I was reminded, I somehow left it and Tom was furious. Maybe this was the reason, maybe not, but on return from hospital, I found myself posted to D Company (Capt. Fergus Higgins). Not particularly popular with Capt. Gibbons! But never mind, D Co was a rifle company and I was happy. I was supernumerary to Lt. Jim Wright. Jim was a super chap, quiet and dignified and had a great feeling for the men under him. Before turning in, he would often quietly go the rounds to get a feeling of how things were from the general hum and tone of the men as they chattered or squabbled or grumbled. It was good to be in a fighting rifle company and it was good being with Jimmy Wright. We were soon sent north, to "pique the heights" as the Emperor Haile Selassie came down from the Sudan to claim his throne. Each officer took a few men and climbed one of the peaks so as to command the country below.

Throning the Emperor

It sounded like the tales we used to read in "Chips" – about the North West Frontier. They came on, in no sort of formation, over the plains and bush, across the rivers and over the hills on a front about a mile wide. Chieftains on ponies,

followers plodding and slipping, spears at the ready, '96 rifles 6 ft long with fixed bayonets, some sort of uniform here and there and mostly barefoot and ragged. As a swarm of bees cluster by the queen, so the throng thickened as the big chief came into view; supported by a contingent of British troops.

As they advanced towards the capital, so we took up fresh positions. I remember the vultures. I was told they had started with thousands of camels but as they climbed out of the gorge of the Blue Nile the poor things could not make it, hence the columns of waiting vultures.

One day we were relieved of piquet duty and Fergus arranged for all D Company officers to meet for a meal in a thatched hut. There would be two or three guest officers from the Emperor's escort. We managed some sort of cold meal. They told us about their campaign. They had had quite a fierce fight. The Commander of the escort sat with Fergus at the head of the table and talked a lot about "Boyles Blunder", (apparently Lt. Col. Boyle had blundered!). The Commander was Col. Orde Wingate (later to be known for his Chindits).* He had a dark beard and rather sallow complexion and when they had gone the general impression was that he was a man not too easy to get on with. (*The Chindits were a British India "Special force" that served in Burma and India in 1943 and 1944. They were formed to put into effect Orde Wingate's newly developed guerrilla warfare tactic of long range penetration. One of the Chindits was Neil Hotchkin of Woodhall Spa.*)

Soon after this, we found ourselves lined out along the main road leading into the capital for the official Entry Parade. Our men stood facing inwards every few paces with officers in front and we came to attention and saluted as the Royal party passed. There were several native onlookers but they were not over excited. Afterwards however there was quite a show of dancing and games below the palace steps. Haile Selassie made a speech and waved to the crowd. He looked very small and dark in his smart uniform and some thought he looked crafty! It is sad to think he came to such a cruel end but they're a mixed up, vicious lot!

To the Lakes

The Southern Italian Army had fallen back south into the area of the lakes. It was not long after we installed the Emperor that our Regiment got orders to move south. The Italians had occupied the country some five years and had been busy making roads, aerodromes, strong points and some husbandry. We travelled on a tarmac road so far, with here and there huge bridges, gorges and embankments. Then there would be patches of just rutted tracks and fords at the foot of perilous twisting slopes. We went thus some 200 miles, all stop-start. I remember one stop when I sat on a grass verge and saw that particular flower that feeds on insects. Some little insect landed on its beautiful surface and whilst busy with the pollen or whatever the petals gradually but firmly closed behind. Quite sadistic!

We were catching up with the enemy. There was the sound of firing not too far off. We got out and marched, and passed a dead African on the verge. Someone talked of 6 Kings African Rifles "decimated". The firing became intense, with heavy artillery and we dumped our haversacks and got into battle order, rations

etc – full alert. They said Sgt. Leaky of 6 Kings African Rifles (Uganda troops) had got the V.C. We stood to, marched and formed up but it was mostly over. We went in mopping up. Two young Italians both shot through the lower tummy were calling Mamma Mamma – aqua! I gave them a drop from my water bottle. I had to tear it away; they were rather pitiful. I got them carted back so far, but whether they lived I don't know. Then there was the young officer with his little finger cut off and his throat cut and several others and lots of prisoners. War is not all a joke. We took the papers off the dead and handed them in. They all had photos of wives and children and they looked older than their documents showed. Our native troops jeered and spat at the prisoners as we passed and had to be kept in order.

We marched and rode in fits and starts; we were now advance guard, with a few light tanks. We passed various villages, mud and thatched circular huts with a hole in the roof for the smoke. There were banana plants, goats and sheep and always some hens. Often the goats went into the hut!

At one stage we were high up the plateau and I remember doing a long range reconnaissance with Fergus, both of us mounted on native ponies. Then I remember very clearly and shall never forget how, very early one morning, as leading platoon behind the tanks, we suddenly came across this group of habash. At first sight they looked to be squabbling, but as our truck came level, a young white man struggled free and ran for his life, but within ten yards he was felled by a youth, about twelve, who shot him. But the worst was to come as we saw the naked white corpse – neither man nor woman. I understood why the poor fellow bolted. I was told that when the tail-end of our company passed the spot, there were two of them.

I remember about that time getting ready for a bayonet charge next morning at dawn, how Jim went round the troops and worked them up and how cold it was in shirt sleeves, so we had to cuddle together. But it was another false alarm.

We were now in Southern Abyssinia, 7000 or 8000 ft up, a well wooded country, cold and wet at night. We passed several large lakes teeming with duck and many guinea fowl. We captured a place called Soddu and were making for Jumia in the Sudan but first there was this river Omo; and that's where poor Jimmy met his end. It was the only quarrel we ever had and it took place as we made the night march up. Also, it was the only time I knew him to change his mind.

Fergus went off to see the Colonel and when he returned he called all the officers up and we could see the river down, down below. There it was in the African sun, about 3 pm, looking for all the world like a peaceful meandering river. Fergus explained that there was a bridge and the enemy had to be surprised at dawn and the bridge rushed. Great stuff this! What had we been doing since 1939? Training in field craft, tactics and the principles of war! Why not swim and get behind them? Why not make a raft? No, we are going to force the bridgehead and our platoon was going to be first over and I was personally to lead over the first section of eight men. Of course, it may be undefended anyway. So we duly got the men together and explained everything and then we went to sleep for a bit.

It was midnight when we set off in single file down the steep slope. The river had looked about a mile away but in fact it was much more and it was quite light when the first shots rang out, as we came to the turn for the bridge. I mentioned how Jimmy changed his mind. It was when we were half way down that he came up and told me he had decided as Platoon Commander he would go first instead of me. We had a fair tiff about this but he was senior and was of course in command. So it happened that I found him shot dead through the eye. It was really thick jungle and he probably got into an enemy "fixed line" as some of our Africans were also shot there. We were close up to the bridge. It was really very creepy country. I had my 45 pistol ready but you could only see four or five yards. Just then there was another rat-a-tat and a terrible declining shout cum squeal as our engineer officer was shot dead. Then, orders came from Fergus to abandon the charge. He had taken it on himself and wonders to this day if he had done right. I think he was right as we found later the enemy were at least battalion strength with medium machine guns fixed on the bridge which was about 150 ft long and half destroyed. We drew back to the hill opposite and exchanged fire as they drew back behind the bridge. They had guns which fired grape which exploded over our heads with a pink puff. One of my men had a perfectly round hole about 1" across and an inch deep in the top of his head.

Next morning I went with Lt. Philip Trevor and some men to bury the dead. Every now and then shells came down and we got under a tank. We located the two officers and the others and dug graves, not very deep because of the shelling and then we laid them in and the Africans found some broad green leaves to put over their faces. The flies had already struck. Philip had a little prayer book and we all stood still and it was emotional and now after 50 years I find it difficult to write this down.

It was about 1st May and the Omo river was in spate – six knots and 360 ft wide. Hidden in the jungle I discovered about a dozen wretched ponies, pitifully thin and hungry. We were down, down below in the Rift Valley; we must have dropped thousands of feet and this valley seemed eerie and dead, dank and tropical.

After a few days of bombardment between batteries (our gunners shot at the Italians on the river whilst their gunners, from some way back, shot at us! Poor Bloody Infantry!). We made a plan to cross the river half a mile downstream.

Our brigade was to lead and D Company was chosen and my platoon was to go first. By this time I was perhaps not so keen to go first, but a little rubber boat was produced and set carefully in the water under overhanging branches and seven or eight of us got in. We were assured that if we were shot at, our chaps would reply. We took some food and plenty of ammo and a Bren gun and pushed off. You never know what will happen in a war and hope for nothing and so it was. Never a shot! We rowed hard but the current took us half a mile downstream. The opposite bank looked like a wall of rhododendrons with little holes about 3'6" high. These were made by the Hippos which were everywhere. We had to crawl through and it was creepy.

Soon some more troops arrived and we dug little trenches. I shared a trench with Fergus but it rained hard and we were wet through. The stars were

particularly bright between the rain and I remember thinking vividly that Napoleon's troops on the way back from Moscow must have looked up at these very same stars. Poor devils!

We then had to advance through the jungle and roust out the Italians. My last experience of a leading men into action had been a failure (I had just said follow me but when I looked they were all laid flat), so this time I called out silly things like sausage or berth and we all kept going. Of course the Italians could hear us coming and mostly they were ready to give up and they didn't shoot so much as put a handkerchief on a stick and poke it out of their hole. Our men used to frisk them for grenades in the breast pocket but I suspect they got more gold watches and pencils than grenades. One poor fellow had both arms off by the elbow and just sat looking silly with blood pumping out. I had to stop one of my men beating the daylight out of another with the butt end of his rifle. There were lots of prisoners, they were probably conscripts – fighting in a foreign land and no stomach for this war. They settled down in wire enclosures ready to go to Kenya. Somewhere there, I took an officer prisoner who handed me his shotgun, a fine 12 bore made by Harrison & Hussey. On the way back it fell off the mess lorry and smashed but next year I had it repaired at Nairobi. A year later, as I shall mention, I was transferred to the Kings African Rifles and had a new Colonel, Humphrey French. One night, at H.Q. mess he heard me mention having this Harrison & Hussey and immediately announced to all that this was doubtless the one he lost in the evacuation from Berbera when he had been in the Camel Corps. I said something like "Oh yeah!" in polite language but he insisted I write down the serial number and lo and behold, there it was when I looked next morning! He gave me an old "Baker" 12 bore which I still have. (Years later, the butt broke and is now in my workshop with its history inside!)

The campaign in the south was all but over. We were called together and the Colonel gave us a little talk of congratulations which tended to make one sentimental and then we were back to Addis and 200 miles up a road to the west where we helped put a bailey bridge over the same river Omo. That was fun. The men had to shove huge sections forward and they really enjoyed it, the Sgt. used to shout

Ja Shi

Ja Shi

Ja Shi Kafa DAYA

and on the word daya (one foot), they all pushed. Then we had an interlude, shooting duck and guinea fowl. I acquired a haversack of Beretta pistols and swapped them all for a bag full of Marie Theresa florins. A few days gambling and dissipation in Addis and then the long trek back to Hargeisa in British Somaliland.

This country is fairly flat semi desert where you found dick-dick, a very small antelope; also several hares. We passed the battlefield where the Camel Corps had been routed and a distant range of low mountains said to contain lions and then we waited at Berbera, the sea port opposite Aden for shipment. It was a dreadful spot as the driven sand cut into your face, ears and eyes and as the day

got up the heat was unbearable. I remember seeing a local shepherd with his flock of sheep at a water hole and they were not thin or meagre as you would expect, but they had great tufts of fat each side of the tail.

Kenya and the Kings African Rifles

We sailed towards Aden and then round the Horn of Africa to Mombasa. So ended the Abyssinia campaign for me.

An experience? An education? Although we'd had no real hard fighting, we had been through hardships and seen the horrible sort of things that take place in war. We had found comradeship and taken part in one of the fastest pursuits in military history. We had seen a variety of country from desert to craggy mountains (5000 ft gorge down the Omo river) which today is beyond the range of most holiday makers and sightseers. I had come to realise how human feelings engulf one's better judgement when you see your friends mutilated ("By God, someone's going to pay for this" were my first words on finding Jimmy Wright). We had witnessed the native people of an ancient empire, their houses, animals, children and culture. Yes, I think it was quite an education. And throughout, I was kept in touch with home by a weekly letter from my mother who never failed to write throughout all the years of the war.

I should mention here that Ngara, my faithful servant, who looked after me so well was shot through the thigh by a South African wild pilot.

You never know in war. We had got used to 2 Nigerian Rifles – baptism of fire and so on and so it was a shock to find all of us "Imperials" were to leave 2 Nigerian Rifles for the Kings African Rifles. I was to spend the next two years in Kenya.

Kenya was a wonderful country – on the equator and yet enjoying a delightful climate in the Highlands Plateau where most of the British lived. Varied topography and two rainy seasons made for a wonderful home for both wildlife and mankind.

Nairobi, on the railway from Mombasa to Uganda, was a town of some 6000 had masonry banks, shops, hotels and houses for Europeans and was entered through a wide avenue, Delamere Avenue.

For some considerable time I was posted to Nanyuki in the Highlands, to a 2nd line battalion guarding 10,000 Italians. There was a huge enclosure of wire with wooden huts and guard posts all round. Working parties of 20 or 30 men went out gathering fuel etc under escort and the duty officer had a motor cycle to do the rounds. I fell in with Martin Towey, the Quartermaster Capt. who had played polo back in Nigeria and so we bought a horse apiece with the idea of training them into polo ponies (and selling them for a profit!). On my rounds I used to canter from post to post and pull up in western fashion as the guard turned out and presented arms – all very gratifying! I was also allowed to ride horseback on route marches which was great.

Jim Stacey from Rhodesia (Spring-Heel Jack) was Company Commander and was great fun. Once we went on a little safari and had the usual sun-downer and the talk was about leopards and how they make a noise like a saw. We slept

that night in a bell tent and about midnight I woke to become aware that the lower tent flap was moving. I also became aware of a noise just exactly like a man sawing a piece of wood, and then in the darkness from my camp bed I saw it coming slowly but surely straight towards the head of my camp bed and the sawing increased accordingly. I was trying to decide whether to reach for my 45 under the pillow or put my head under the clothes as the intruder came right up to my bed and then gave one final rattle and all was still. I think I was never quite so frightened in my life!

Jim's poor little terrier had laid down and died.

The officers were encouraged to shoot, ride and fish. There were herds of 300 or 400 Thompson gazelles but always on the open plain and out of shot. The best chance was at dawn or dusk, close to a donga or streamside where water buck sometimes appear. At dawn we were marvellously close to nature, particularly when the sun came up behind the snow-covered peak of Mount Kenya. The Africans were really at home on these jaunts. They were barefoot and were so quick at picking up the spoor and spotting the nyama (meaning equally game or meat); and they always know their bearings (useful, to get home again!). Once, I went into the thicket after a fine water buck we had seen. We (my orderly and myself) went quietly along, peering through the undergrowth. Suddenly there was the sound of movement and I brought my .256 to the ready. A further crash and then, Oh My Lord! there at 20 yards was the tusk and bulk of the biggest rhino in the world coming straight at us. In a flash my orderly was up a tree and in another so was I as he flew past underneath. When we eventually collected our courage and had got out of the thicket, we discovered my orderly had left the 12 bore at the foot of the tree and we had to go in and get it! The water buck got away!

There were some lovely fast flowing streams coming off the Aberdare Mountains and in the cool clear water there were lots of trout. The lower limit was 14" and lower downstream 16". But the bends and rapids must be a paradise to real fishermen. I was sad to leave the Nigerians, but life was very pleasant. I remember Cosmo Haskard of the Inniskillins, one of our subalterns who had the most attractive Irish voice I ever did hear. There was Mossy Cooper, 6'4" and full of fun and "Samaki" ("fisherman") Joe. Everyone had a nickname. Back at Feltwell in the RAF I had been "Dopey" (one of the seven dwarfs) and now I was Daisy or later on Dick.

There were various courses and sometimes leave of absence. My first leave I spent hanging around Base Details at Nairobi and for lack of something better, I shared a hut with a bright young Captain called Culver. Culver was impressive. His first promotion came when he was stationed in Bermuda and the visiting General happened to call when all the officers were away and he'd made the right impression. He had brought a Division out at Dunkirk. He was really a Major but was war substantive Capt. and actually had been a Lt. Col. during the Abyssinian campaign in Cunningham's Corps where he had been Deputy Assistant Quartermaster General. One night he came in after having tea with Lady Scott in Nairobi and lifted up his pillow and said "I don't often show these to anyone" and there were the ribbons of the D.S.O. and M.C. What a fellow! What

a Hero! Next morning the escort arrived and he quietly fell in to be marched off for his Court Martial. Apparently he'd got himself the job of ships adjutant on the way out and had posted himself in Part II orders and before it all came to light, he'd taken part under Cunningham and, so I was told, had done the job quite well. Later in the war he was arrested walking down Delamere Avenue in full Colonels regalia!

Towards Christmas 1941, listening to the wireless playing "Deep in the Heart of Texas" there was a break to announce Pearl Harbour, and the aspect of the war had a new look.

Early in 1942 the news was dreadful. Our two huge "impregnable" battleships had been sunk, Hong Kong, Philippines, Indo China overrun and now Singapore had capitulated. This was the time during the whole war, when our fortunes seemed at their lowest ebb. Morale had really sunk low.

But life went on. The role of our battalion was to change to a more active unit. I went on a mortar course, a tactics course and later, a battle course. This latter was at 7000 ft up and very tough but I got ready for it, stopped smoking and I think I did well. I got a good report, which led to promotion.

In the meantime I had a lovely holiday at the home of Col. Hoey, the uncle of one of our subalterns, Hubert Perry. We travelled by train on the Uganda line and got off at Hoey's Bridge Station. The Col. was at the war but Mrs Hoey was kindness itself. She had come out in 1909 as a young bride and they built a wooden house on a mountain side and farmed about 10,000 acres. The natives don't appear to have been disturbed and seemed perfectly happy. In the valley below towards Uganda a large area was occupied by Africaans and Mrs Hoey told me she'd seen them outspan soon after 1909. They had been unhappy in the Transvaal after the Boer war and had collected their wagons and bullocks with all their furniture, implements, forges, seeds, ammunition, possessions and crossed the great Zambezi and trekked up north. It must have taken them some years until at last they reached their promised land.

Another leave, I rode on horseback from Nanyuki to Thompsons Falls, some of the way right across the plains amongst the gazelle, impala, giraffe, wildebeest etc. I saw no lions or elephants – but came really close to nature.

But for the most part it was camp life. Our troops came from Nyasaland and spoke chinyanja. We had to learn the language but a lot of them could speak pigeon English. They were sent by draft convoy to their homes on leave before we went abroad. They went through the old "German East", Taboro and down to Blantyre in Central Africa. One poor fellow, a corporal ironically called Ali Finali got depressed over promotion or something and one day just sat on his chair in his bell tent and blew the top of his head off. There was a little trap door in the skull and the brains had hit the tent and were all intact like a bag of lard!

By and by our battalion was made up to fighting strength, new weapons issued, older officers quietly transferred and the intensity of training increased. Names of places like Cox's Bazaar became the talk in the mess rather than Nairobi or Muthaga Club. Secret and top secret orders began to float about. We were off somewhere eastwards. We had a final station at Moshi at the foot of

Mt. Kilimanjaro, 19,000 ft. The pink/white summit, not craggy like Kenya but, rounded, was wonderfully inspiring at sundown after a hard day's training in the thick thorn scrub.

With the Japanese looking at India, certain disaffected groups had, (so we learned later), formed the I.N.A. (Indian National Army) and I suppose the authorities in Kenya became themselves apprehensive because at this time there was great 'security of arms'. One night I was woken with a report that one of my men had lost his rifle. This was a heinous crime. There was an immediate telegram to Command H.Q. (C.O's. name foremost) – not popular!

So we turned out the whole Corp and towards dawn it was discovered down a deep latrine. So we formed Hollow Square and the culprit had to go down a ladder and fish it out from all the maggots and when he got out again the Sgt. Major noticed the bolt was missing so he went down again. In the morning I had a talk with the African Regimental Sgt. Major about the man who'd stolen the rifle and thrown it down and he said "Well sir, we're about to move and a court martial causes trouble – why not take him in the bush and beat him?" So I did and that was that. [I might mention here that when I first joined the Royal West African Frontier Force they did still flog and I was present once. Hollow Square was formed by the battalion – the drums rolled – sentence read and the culprits laid down with a towel over the bottom and then they were each given three aside and never a murmur was heard and it was all over – and I used to think back on that when I saw (and indeed had to order) that wretched interminable field punishment of march, double, march, halt, double hour on end after a days march, in Burma].

In August 1941 Captain Fergus Higgins wrote to R. Hay Bell (RHB's father at Lansdowne):

"Dear Mr. Bell,

It is not usual to write a letter like this but on the sad occasion of Bob leaving my Company, I thought perhaps you would like to know how extremely well he has done in every way in the campaign in which we have been through together.

He is one of the coolest officers I have seen under fire and he has always taken the greatest care of the men under him.

I only hope he has the luck to keep fit and out of harms way. I am convinced he will soon get the MC which he should by rights have got before.

I am so looking forward to meeting him again in England when the war is finally over.

*Yours sincerely
Fergus Higgins
D. Company
2 Nigerian Regiment*

CHAPTER FOUR

Burma

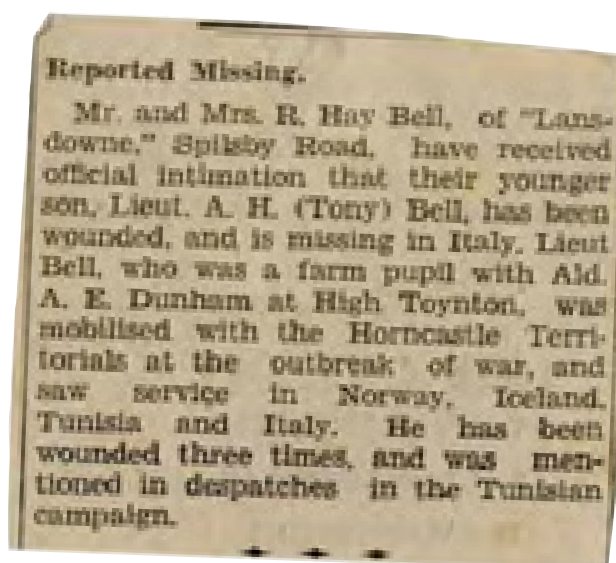
Ceylon

We eventually sailed in convoy from Mombasa to Colombo. It was about 2.30 pm on a Sunday when I was sitting on deck quietly writing home. Someone disturbed my concentration about a ship sunk and I looked up. Something was happening. Then I saw about $\frac{3}{4}$ mile away the bows of a liner were sticking out of the sea and what looked like ants swarming over it and then there was nothing but the ants in the sea under the tropical sun. First thoughts were to go immediately and rescue those wretched people. Sirens now began to screech, the destroyers sped in various directions and we felt and heard the boom of depth charges. Torpedoes make a ripple as they go (or come!) and we kept an anxious eye open. To get a better view, I climbed up high but was embarrassed to hear a sailor call out "We're not allowed in the lifeboats until the Captain gives the order!"

Land, oh what would we give for a sight of land in place of this vast endless Indian Ocean. Instead of collecting the survivors, the whole convoy was splitting up, away from the stricken liner. Oh wretched, wretched souls, to be left with the waves and sunshine. [I was told later that 1700 went down, 150 rescued later by a destroyer; that the Jap Sub was brought to the surface by depth charges, then rammed and destroyed; many nurses among those lost. This we gleaned from a Naval Lt. Commander in Colombo a few days later. It took place two days out from Colombo.]

My three months in the Island of Ceylon was overshadowed by the report that my brother Tony had been wounded and missing in Italy. After Norway, Tony had served as a corporal in 4 Lincolns in Iceland, had been commissioned into 6 Lincolns and served in the heavy fighting in N. Africa before the Italian campaign. He'd already been wounded but managed to come round. However this report seemed grim. He'd been seen last wounded and lying in No Man's Land and three months had gone by.

The Island of Ceylon is about 300 miles from north to south with Colombo half way down the west side and I had my Company H.Q. with platoons stationed here and there in rubber plantations. When you



drove along the road, the rubber trees which are all perfectly straight, flashed by in the most immaculate lines, both on the right angle and the 45° angle.

Before long we were brigaded up for a spell of jungle warfare training. The Arakan (the coastal strip between India and Burma where we were fighting the Japanese) was all the talk, and grisly talk it was. We went down south towards Hambantola where it's extremely hot with lots of forest. We did battalion and brigade exercises in the heat of the day and also of the night. We marched and pretended to charge, fight and creep about, run and march until wearied to death. Once, after three days of this with practically no sleep, I saw a whole battalion literally marched to a standstill. Many men and some officers just simply collapsed on the line of march. They were testing us.

One night I went off on my own to check an outpost four miles across country. I left my orderly because he was all in. Something happened, I forget what, but I was delayed at the outpost, and when I started back it was dusk. I had a compass and of course I knew the back bearing and an hour should have brought me to camp soon after dark, but I hadn't gone far when I heard a great snort and there, about ten paces away, was a bull buffalo with huge horns, so I did my usual cowardly trick of 'up the tree'. This bit of jungle seemed well stocked with wild life because the next thing there was a wild boar mother and young, and then it was dark. So dark you couldn't see five yards. It seemed to be a complete canopy of everlasting laurel bushes. I had a Colt 45 and water bottle but I knew I was about 70 miles from the coast road. Although I stopped every five yards to take a back bearing, I invariably found I was going about 80 degrees off course. I went on like this hour after hour until about 1 o'clock when I suddenly heard a rifle shot about a mile away. Dear old Roger Parsons, my second in command had thoughtfully guided me in and all was well.

I was fortunate to be chosen to act as an umpire in some very large command manoeuvres and I had a sort of roving commission over a great part of the Island, through Anuradhapura to Trincomalee and had a chance to swim in the beautiful sea where it's so clear you can see down 20 feet to the white coral rocks below. The most delightful place to swim I ever saw in my life. I also saw some beautiful golden pheasants crossing the road.

I had been given "C" Company by Col French and I was delighted and full of pride in my unit. Parsons, my 2nd in command and I had four good young platoon officers. In due course one of our platoons was adjudicated the smartest in the whole battalion. We were very very keen and after months of intensive training, almost yearning for something to do.

Chittagong was the city in western India where the British had a huge base camp and this was our next stop.

Burma

Chittagong is a fairly sprawling untidy sort of humid area full of sheds and bodies and vehicles and so when a telegram arrived ordering one officer and one orderly to report for battle experience with the Seaforth Highlanders on the central front, for a month, Roger Parsons found himself Company Commander pro tem and Alfred, my orderly and I set off up the Brahmaputra. You could

hardly see the other side. After crossing, we took a train, officers in one carriage, orderlies in another. We slept and in the morning discovered the rear carriages had been taken off and gone, they said towards New Delhi! For some reason I cannot now recall, I got to Dimapur by motor car, going through Shillong which lies in beautiful tea growing country. My companions were a tea planter and his wife – he had a tracheotomy and could not speak. We climbed into the mountain range and looked back down on to the beautiful Valley of Assam below.

About this time, the happy news came through in a letter from home to say that Tony was alive. He had been badly shot up, taken in by the Germans, operated on in Vienna and swapped with a German likewise wounded. He was on his way home! Great News!

I joined the Seaforths between Kohima and Imphal*. Having seen the relics of the Kohima battlefields we loaded up at Mile 62. The monsoon was at its height and it was eerie going up to the front. I was attached to A Company who lived in small holes in the hillside (like sand martins). After a few days, we made an attack on a hill called Nipon. There was a night march in single file and it took most of the night to go about a mile as it was so incredibly steep, overgrown, muddy and wet. The men had efflorescence on the back of the helmet as a guide as there was no talking. There was a long wait and then firing and the chaps in front took the hill. The Japs were very short of supplies and were in a poor state. Many just dropped down and died and we burned their remains with flame throwers. We dug in. It rained steadily, ceaselessly, day and night and the problem was to keep the men fit. In fact we didn't! So there was this constant business of evacuation and new faces. Every night mepacrine was taken under strict officer supervision. It was quite an experience seeing someone else's war and I got quite attached to the Seaforths. I saw mountain guns firing over open sights, dead men and dead horses and one night on a mountain side it was so cold and wet that Alfred and I put both colour and rank aside and cuddled together till dawn.

At last "C" Company was here and we moved ahead as the 11th E. African division. First, my Company was sent east where we crossed a tributary of the Chindwin and I remember how we tied the jeep in a tarpaulin and pulled it over and up the escarpment the other side. Then we were pulled so far back and advanced south down the Kabaw valley – parallel to and west of the Chindwin River.

We had a map with dotted lines for forest tracks and names like Palel, Tamu, Sugarnoo, Tiddim, Shwegin and we followed the track towards Shwegin which was the one used by Gen. Alexander during the retreat from Burma in 1942. The gruesome remains of retreat were very apparent.

**The Battle of Imphal took place in the region around the city of Imphal, the capital of the state of Manipur in North-East India from March until July 1944. Japanese armies attempted to destroy the Allied Forces at Imphal and invade India but were driven back into Burma with heavy losses. Together with the simultaneous Battle of Kohima on the road by which the encircled Allied Forces at Imphal were relieved, the battle was the turning point of the Burma Campaign, part of the South-East Asian Theatre of the Second World War. The defeat at Kohima and Imphal was the largest defeat to that date in Japanese history.*



Looking at the map of Asia, one can with care identify where Burma and India meet and with even more study, the Kebaw Valley. It is pitifully small on the map, perhaps a quarter mile long and yet it seemed interminable to us in those autumn days of 1944. There were little bits of skirmishes, pincer movements, marches and halts. Looking back now, I can't properly explain why it took us so long, we started in July and by December we were just breaking out into lower Burma and had advanced perhaps 150 miles.

There were times when we were way back from the front because I remember training the men in shooting – or rather practicing and one man was having a problem. I took over from the Sgt for a moment to give a precise and distinctive demonstration on the matter of first and second pressure, remembering my basic elementary training. To demonstrate how to take the pressure, a suitable target is needed and as it happened, from our hillside you could just see a water buffalo in a paddy field 300 yards away. Just the job; but the twit had a live round in and bang! For better or worse my aim was good. The point about the pressure got home but the poor old buffalo went down like a stone, and it cost me money to make it good with the owner.

It was just before we went up to the front that the whole division was drawn up and inspected by Lord Mountbatten. As I took him along my Company I had to bring forward a man who had distinguished himself and Louis was so tickled because his name was Private Soap! When the troops had been dismissed, all the 400 officers were introduced personally to Lord Louis and he was so charming and quick witted with his repartee.

Then he got on his little box and addressed us and I never heard anyone like it. At the time he was a man of about 44, brown and his strong bare arms and his bearing and his good looks and frank, manly expression all confirmed the hero image of the Commander of Kelly. He created a feeling of euphoria, hero worship, do or die! The sort of feeling, had it been Waterloo or Singapore, we'd willingly rush forward at his merest wish!

(The rather sad epilogue is that in recent years and since his death, the report goes round that he carried his soap box round as a matter of course, so the impression of having been his chosen few becomes a bit diluted; nevertheless it was very effective at the time).

Meanwhile, back down the Kabaw Valley, we were slowly and steadily pushing the Japanese southwards. I was sent on detachment to occupy a certain position for a week or two and found myself in charge of some 350 men in the middle of the jungle. We formed a box and sent out patrols and tried to control the coughing at night. I used to lie in that hole in the ground and think of this and that. Were we secure? Were we actively doing our job? When it came to charging with bayonets, would the men follow or would they hang back? What to do if the Japs suddenly swooped into our box in the night. One night I went round the posts and came to one where there was no sentry out but a couple of ground sheets fixed up, obviously a shelter for my men from the rain. What to do? I loathed Field Punishment so I crept up quietly and then with a loud shout, I sprang right on to their bivouac. It was hilarious the way they shot out in all directions like rabbits from a stook of corn! I think it did them good.

Whilst on this detachment, I decided we should try and find out something of the enemy's movements and positions. So I selected 25 men along with my European Sgt. Major Twose, and with 20 porters for the first day, we set off on a long range patrol. The Chindwin River was 25 miles over the mountain range and we had a map, ½" to the mile, showing some dotted lines – mule tracks used by forest Officers before the war. It was all single file, so the scout in front took turns.

It was a clearing in the hillside jungle above the level of the teak trees, where we had our first mid-day halt. The 40 Askari were quietly chattering over thin rations and I sat alone, and the thought came to me that here I was in this particular spot – I would always remember its intimacy, each blade of grass, the particular bend in the forest track – why, I can't tell. It could be anywhere and yet I distinctly remember saying to myself "I shall remember this spot and its intimacy as long as I live". And I do. Perhaps it was poignant because I was at last leading a fighting patrol. Doing my own thing; looking for glory perhaps. I had been put in charge of a detachment of some 350 men and thought we ought to do something rather than just maintain the "Box". It lasted 4 days and it was fairly exciting.

By the end of the second day we were close to the village of Chaungzon, where our intelligence people said there was a Japanese outpost with telegraph. So we made a little raid with orders not to shoot but to capture someone. We caught two young men and were told there were Japs in a certain house and more in the next village, so we got one of them to lead us to this house at dawn where we had a little fighting. When we got into the house we found a few papers but no telephone.

One Jap had jumped for it and got away and one was dead. Twose had been wounded and gone back and I was slightly hit by grenade fragments but was okay on my feet, so we decided to quit before the Japs came from the next village. We covered each others withdrawal, section by section and I came out last. like an idiot, I got on the wrong track and began to think I was going to meet the Japs! However, I managed to keep cool and cut across the right way and soon joined my lot. We left some men to guard our rear with orders that if they shot a Jap, they were not to just say they had, but to bring back some sort of evidence. An hour later we heard brisk shooting in our rear and waited tensely. Shortly, Cpl. Jumo reported in, carrying what was left of a Jap tunic, so riddled it was with bullets. We were getting our blood up.

Epilogue: We got back with only two wounded and a prisoner and a sword which I kept because no one else would go in the hut and the War Office printed and circulated an account of it headed "War Experience" or something. There were lots of writers and publishers at that time!

It was now November and the rain had stopped. The rivers feeding the Chindwin are of course torrents in the monsoon but afterwards nearly dried up. Some were full of small fish, a few inches long. They could be stunned by grenade and the soldiers quickly collected a supper. In the valleys were lots of beautiful teak trees, straight as a die and there were lots of huge bamboos. Sometimes we cut them down and made corduroy roads so that the supply lorries could move.

It was hard work. Only once did we go without food for two days (correction – we had one potato each) – but we were terribly hungry because of tree felling. We met up with a gang led by Bill Williams (?) who had elephants to help make the roads. They trudged along dragging the trees with large chains. In my Company was a man Hassan the tailor, a kikuyu from another tribe, and as a tailor he regarded himself as a non-combatant and refused orders to cross the Chindwin and had to be frog-marched, but we heard no more.

My war was coming to an end. We crossed the Chindwin River on a bridge of boats and pontoons and were in close contact with the retreating Japanese. Early in December, our Battalion took over as the Advance Guard. We were advancing southwards along a track on the eastern bank of the Chindwin with a steep escarpment on our left. At a place called Shwegin, the River turned left and Col. French called his Company Commanders up and it was arranged that I should take 'C' Company up this escarpment and clear it for the advance. So we sort of scaled up this very steep hill and had a bit of shooting with one or two men hit but we soon got command. We reported back on the radio. Down the other side it was fairly open and gently sloping and you could see the river and road going eastwards into the trees. We had done what we had been ordered to do but just to make sure all was clear, I placed the men out and took a section down and back along the road and it was just before we were about to round the corner back to our friends that someone seemed to hit me across the left shoulder.

Lucky for me the next burst kicked up the sand on my left and I made the corner. Of course I remember the day well, 12th December (1944) and one part particularly, when we started off. I remember standing there with the Colonel having given orders to all my platoon commanders and watching my men advancing to the positions for the attack and as they passed us, section by section, platoon by platoon, the thoughts of the years of intensive training, hardships, humour and discipline, assailed my mind.

I felt 'C' Company was good and must admit to a degree of pride.

Fortunately the men with me had got round the corner and one of them gave me the nicest drink I ever had, cold tea from his water bottle. 'A' Company was advancing and I got a man to stop the blood and a shot of morphine and reported to Battalion H.Q. and told them what I could.

After getting my wound 'dressed' I got back to a forward field hospital where we were eight or ten of us in a row on stretchers supported by two large bamboos so when one man turned, we all knew it. Then Comilla, Calcutta and Base Hospital at Hyderabad in the Deccan. Lady Mountbatten talked to us in the train. Whilst in Hyderabad, I was invited to a ball at the British Regency – very impressive dancing on the flood-lit patio beneath enormously high pillars, bearded Sikhs in full dress guarding the entrance with drawn swords. 'The Last of the Raj' I thought!

It was whilst recuperating there, I got into a bridge four with two Majors and a Lt.Col. and one of them produced a book 'Culbertson's Self Teacher.' We took a lesson each day and although this Acol has rather taken over, Ely Culbertson



was never wrong. Whilst in Secunderabad (attached to Hyderabad) I visited the bazaar in search of diamonds and silks. I really couldn't tell diamonds from polished sapphire or even polished glass, but it was an experience.

In due course my plaster casing was removed and we were put on the train for Bombay.

There I was given an Airline Ticket, £150.00, and for the next four days, we travelled on stretchers in a Sunderland Flying Boat: Karachi, Bahrain (nothing but sand), then over the desert to Cairo.

It was interesting; flying up the shore of the Persian Gulf, seeing the lonely shore line; then inland over what looked like one huge area of sand dunes and crags – not much for flying boats! Then we approached Cairo where I recall the sudden change from yellow sand to green cultivation, then the Nile, then again the distant line of green and yellow.

Putting down at Cairo, we had time to take a taxi to see the Sphinx and a pyramid and to be greatly impressed by the massive masonry at the 'Queen's Chamber'. Next stop was Catania which I remember chiefly for the oranges, it being February and harvest time. Over the Alps the flying boat used to suddenly drop 20 feet or so and it seemed the wings would fall off. We felt poorly, but in due course, there was Poole Harbour. I had shared my journey with Roger Corbet from Harpenden who had been O.C. 'D' Company and had had both legs broken, but steadfastly declined any physical help. We shared an ambulance to Shaftsbury. You could just see out and it was really wonderful.

It was a Sunday afternoon in February 1945 and the sun was shining on the green grass, hedges and trees of Southern England. The villages and pubs were there and the odd courting couple. We were home!

Five years had turned my father's hair from dark brown to white but he was very active. Tony and I were both on extended sick leave and were thoroughly spoilt by all and sundry, during those closing months of the war, which was so dreadful for so many.

Several of our friends had gone including John Gaunt and Harry Hudson from the old Goose Gang. David Drakes, Ambrose Grounds, Sidney Bunch and John Wynn had been taken prisoner and had a terrible march through N. Prussia. Peter Kime came through with the M.C. Dear old Peter was so kind to all his animals.

But of course life went on. V.E. Day came and we made great to do. There was the V.J. Day when all Lincoln Stonebow and High Street were so crowded, the jack-jumpers fell on your shoulders but we only laughed. Drakes swarmed up a flag pole, collared the flag and, being in uniform, we led a parade up Silver Street! There were parties and dances, shooting invitations and hunting with the Southwold under Lesley Butcher.

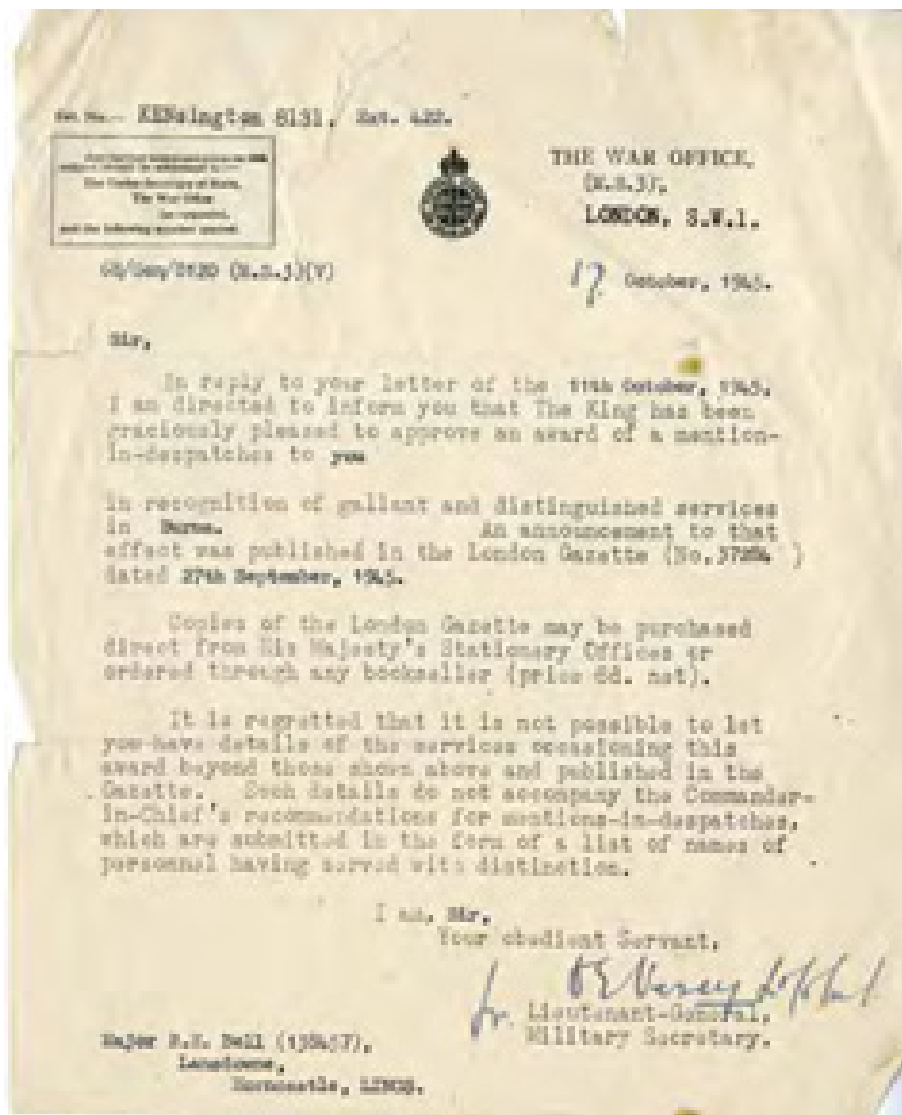
The war had brought a change – many changes. Soon after the Victory Parades, Churchill was out and Atlee represented the masses under a Labour Government; a degree of Socialism in a mild form, health, educational and social benefits were paramount. Many of the traditional disciplines seemed

to be eased up. The formalities between master and man and between (dare I mention the word) classes was less pronounced.

Although Britain had been totally committed to the war and although we lost some 300,000, Poland, Germany, Russia and Central Europe experienced vast horrors of great magnitude. I was shocked by the official pamphlet with photos of the Belsen Camp. Thousands of wretched people were overrun and either fled or perished or joined the 'wrong side'.

As regards the British Empire which we had fought so hard to preserve, everything changed. Worldwide thinking on Empires and Colonies had altered. Emancipation had been on the way for some time. Now, all Nations must govern themselves. On 15th August 1947, India was divided (more or less) between the Muslims and the Hindus and we quit. Most of our colonies followed suit in the ensuing years. To avoid bloodshed between various tribes, our Government saw fit to allow some millions of coloured people into Britain.

For some time my left arm and hand were paralysed but a further operation at Harlow Wood Hospital and follow up therapy made it so that I could grip.



CHAPTER FIVE

Civvy Street

My father had what was probably the best one man auctioneering business in the County, and this was the deserved result of his straight forward approach to every situation. In fact Hay Bell was a member of the Horncastle Old Volunteers, Chairman for many years of Horncastle Urban District Council, a Justice of the Peace, a county councillor, director of the Horncastle Water Company, governor of Queen Elizabeth's Grammar School, founder member of the Horncastle Farmers' Club, member of the Lincolnshire Branch of the Auctioneers' and Estate Agents' Institute and was its chairman in 1943.

So, after a year's sick leave, gadding the party rounds in uniform and on full pay, I gave up the idea of a military career and joined him in the old established firm of Parish, Stafford Walter & Bell. Tony came in too.

The officers mess had done something towards getting rid of the self-consciousness that close families experience, particularly in the teens, and we found ourselves addressed as 'Old Boy' and all that; and my father was 'Pa'.

Apart from being very astute, straight and businesslike, my father was very understanding, full of common sense, perfectly at home with all classes of people. He was witty and good at all sports and had such good taste. He lost an eye in the shooting field but I never got to know who did it. He was my partner for 25 years or rather I had the benefit of being his partner and no one had a better.

The gross taking of the business had about doubled since the war began and was now about £3,000 with outgoings of about £1,000 and so my father had accumulated some £4,000 or £5,000 and with this he purchased the High Toynton House Farm, 250 acres, as let to Mr. Newton.

During the next year or two we leaned on my father to give Mr Newton notice to quit on grounds of poor husbandry, the farm being undoubtedly run down. He didn't like doing it, but eventually it was left to the War Agricultural Committee to decide. They said he must go, he



*R. Hay Bell with one of A. H. & S. Bell's
Ayrshire dairy cows.*

did, and in April 1948 Tony, Betty and Shirley moved in. Tony & Shirley were tenants, A H & S Bell and Betty the housekeeper. There was no electricity and the only water was from a hand pump. The house was large, cold and basic in the extreme. But they bought 26 pedigree Ayrshire heifers, Pa built them a dairy and they all worked hard. They got a water diviner, sunk a bore hole 105ft deep, found water and made a wind pump which supplied the village.

That was the spring of 1948. In the spring of 1947 there was a tremendous snow storm from early January until the end of March, when many roads on the Wolds were drifted up nearly as high as the telegraph poles and rabbits were eating the leaves on the trees. Many auction sales had to be abandoned and one such was the Stainfield Estate. 1,300 acres odd including 500 acres woodlands were put on the market by Mr. Tyrwhitt-Drake. Two firms of auctioneers were involved, from London and Oxford and the local bailiff told us he thought £18,000 or so would buy it. Tony and I went to look and thought it cheap so we made enquiries further, to be told it had been taken off the market, as the owner's friend, Major Wilson had returned from India and favoured the shooting.

We were not to be put off and so we got in Tony's £5 Riley and went to see Mr. Tyrwhitt-Drake at Amersham. He was paralysed from a polo accident, very pleasant and was said to have got through £250,000 gambling! We told him how we'd both come back from the war and how much time and effort we had expended all in good faith due to the extant sale catalogue and asked if he would not, in fairness, set his own figure on the property. In the finish, he said he would speak to his agent and after an hour or so we met again and he said £25,000, (50% increase). However we were still interested and he agreed to give us an offer for a week.

Between us, we could raise the deposit. Two days before the expiry date we invited Mr. Baxter to be a 50% partner and after looking round he agreed and said 'get it bought' so we sent a telegram and bought it. In due course we sold it all again and made about £700 profit. There was nothing in writing between Mr. Baxter and us and when it came to sharing out, he assumed he would only get a third, there being three of us, but we had said 50% and he really appreciated this and to this day I have such a good relationship with his grandson (his sons having sadly died).

1948 and 1949 were busy years for us as auctioneers. Robert Morrison came into the office for a time. His easy manner and youthful charm enthused us and we found ourselves full of business. Amongst others, Ramsdens of Hareby let the estate to Harold Ward, John Heath took the tenancy of Thimbleby, Bob Craven bought Wispington from Frank Gaunt who had died, Peter Kime and Gerard Kime bought Manor Farm, West Ashby, John Bourn rented Hall Farm, West Ashby, and Charlie Baxter sold Haugham to Joe Nickerson for £60 an acre, a record at that time. Also, sadly, Arthur Read died of polio in five days and I found myself concerned with farming his estate, jointly with my co-trustees. In addition, as one of the three chartered surveyors in the county, I was instructed from time to time by Government Departments for such tasks as taking public enquiries, being the County Tree Officer etc., which was interesting.

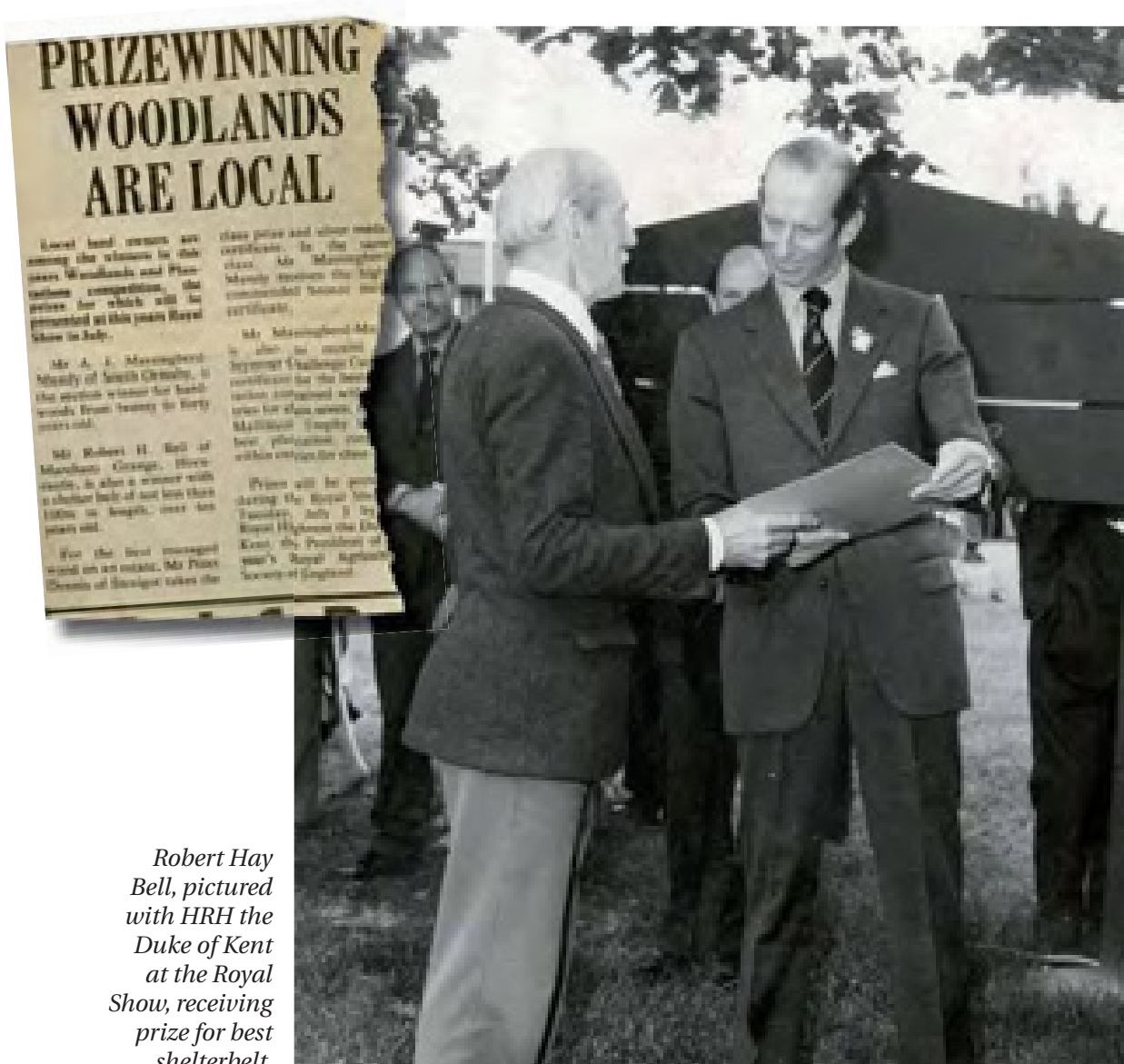


*Circa 1962 at Lansdowne, Horncastle. Back row: Cavil Peacock, Heather Bell, RHB, Tony Bell;
Centre row: RLHB, Jean Peacock, R. Hay Bell, Elsie Bell (née Morton), Margie Bell, Helen;
Front row: Pauline, Anne Peacock, Sue, David, Alison and Ruth.*



*Circa 1965 Harvest Time at The Sands, Grange Farm, Mareham on the Hill:
Back row: David Hay Bell, Susan Margaret Bell, Robert Lawrence Hay Bell;
Centre row: Robert Hay Bell, Annie Kime, Wendy Kime, Margaret Vickers, Paul Vickers, Sue Barlow;
Front row: Ruth Bell, Helen Janet Bell, Sue Dean and Pauline Bell.*

The management of the North Ormsby Estate, with its 1,000 acre in-hand farm had all gone with the death of Edwin Nickerson, but my father was at that time appointed land agent to Commander Maitland, our new M.P. and this kept us on our toes, (and still does!). Also, at that time I bought the Glebe Farm at Thimbleby, 94 acres of bare land, with a shed or two. As it was mid May before I could enter the farm, the first year was a dead loss, what with fallowing most of the land and building a house. The next year, however, all the crops were good. I employed one man (Mr Annikin) plus two extra for harvest and it was a delight to gather in the harvest and build the four stacks with no machinery; we just used hay forks and could hear each other talk. It would be almost the last time that happened in England. I had some cattle and a few sheep and I used to sleep on the straw and lamb them. It was VERY cold. I had always wanted to farm and I enjoyed it. I had two horses that lived mostly at Horncastle but sometimes I had them at Thimbleby.



Robert Hay Bell, pictured with HRH the Duke of Kent at the Royal Show, receiving prize for best shelterbelt.

One morning, very early, I went to the farm, motored through the first grass field and opened the gate to where the horses were, and drove through but before I could get out, one of the horses had moved up to the gate. To cut a story short, they made the next field at a canter. It turned into a gallop as I tried to cut them off from the road. In vain! They made the road through the village and down Thimbleby Hill before I caught one in Prospect Street and the other was held up in Bank Street. The moral – always close the gate!

In the season, I hunted once a week or so and used to tie up to the white wooden railings, which in those days guarded the river, whilst I had an hour in the office. Once it cost me £4.10 for a new length of rails as my horse had pulled back and had trailed the railings nearly to the church! He had blood. I would hack as far as Hainton and sometimes we'd both walk home after a hard day hunting. The best run I had was 31st March 1951 when a fox was put up at Maltby Wood, between Alford and Louth. He ran across the Horncastle and Louth road at Dovendale. It was a dream to see the hounds in full cry tearing up the wold to the North, with the field strung out behind. By Kelstern and Binbrook we went, then left and so to North Willingham, close to Market Rasen, 17 miles in all. I remember Bill Jessop was up.

In the summer of 1950 Mareham Grange Farm came up for sale on the death of Harry Wingate. It was 367 acres and joined the Toynton Farm on a long front. It was about the only time I failed to take my father's advice, because he said at breakfast: 'don't go above £15,000 or £16,000 at the outside'. But I went to £17,350 and have never regretted it. I let the farm to Tony at £2 acre, did up the house and moved in on 2nd January 1951 with a Mr. & Mrs. Cooper.

The next winter, I planted five acres of Mareham Long Cover and Poplar Holt. After buying Mareham I had to sell the Thimbleby Farm (to Vin Williams) for about £7,000.

Those were busy days. Betty had just married Bill Marsland and Jean, Cavil Peacock, a young solicitor. In April Pam Crooks was married at Raithby and at the reception I met up with Heather Dean. She was sweet and after 45 years still is. She has been so sensitive to the wishes and needs of others, so very generous to little ones, old ones and all animals. Her family and friends have been a delight to know and she has always been warm towards all that was mine – and when I write warm I mean lovingly warm. She is a great sport, still loves to dance, and now the children are away she tends the vegetable garden where she produces all we need or nearly all, and a lot to give away. She never ever uses fertilisers or spray of any kind.

Soon after we were married, Heather's parents, Dr & Mrs Dean, came to stay from time to time and it was a great pleasure to have them. We also had another occasional visitor in the form of Heather's bridesmaid Margaret Smith. So it became a bonus to our wedding when she and Tony announced they were to be married a year to the day after us.

In the December of 1952, Alison was born and our happiness was complete. She was there in the pram outside when I got home, and our black Labrador,

Bimbo would jump up from the sunny front door entrance. By November 1955 we had three under three, sold the horses and bought another pram!

I will not catalogue the happenings of the next 45 years of so, but suffice to say our four children grew up in the countryside getting and keeping on the best of terms with all their many cousins; that in due course they all went away to school and mostly to college, all of which we managed to pay for; that we have enjoyed without blemish the close friendship of Tony and Margaret; that together Tony and I ran a large pig unit for many years in close and friendly partnership; that we experienced the death of my two eldest sisters, Heather's sister Mary and all four of our greatly loved parents; that on an average of three years Tony and my Father and myself have planted a wood of some sort, made a lake.... of which we now see the benefit.

I must now say how fortunate we are to have such a son as Robert who has developed into a sound, popular and straightforward business man, the 6th Bell in a line from Geo. Bell of Delvine. Alison has developed her own business and she and Ken are a comfort to us in our advancing years; Pauline is good at giving us physical massage treatment for our various ailments and Ruth is married to Alan, helps with lambing and has produced our one and only grandchild, Lawrie, seven nearly and a bit of a card!

CHAPTER SIX

Rambling On

Sometimes I am asked if I can remember the Horse Fair, as at one time, Horncastle had the biggest horse fair in the Country – some said in Europe. That was back in the 19th Century but when I went to the Grammar School in 1927 there were two fairs, June and August. June was about finished but in August all the Bull Ring and up North Street it was full of horses. They were mostly haltered and tended by the owners or grooms and stood on the cobbled road and sometimes even on the footpath but generally they didn't kick or bite, so you just wove your way through. Doubtless a lot of bartering was done, but as auctioneers, Parish & Co held an auction sale in the New Inn Yard and this went on until about 1950. About half got sold and the rest valued free of charge! My father used to say August Fair lasted three weeks when it was at its height and that all the pub yards (and many private yards) were full to capacity, with every other house up North Street selling beer, but after World War I it was just one day.

Horncastle has changed a lot since those days and it's interesting to reflect on the changes which took place before that. Before 1885 you got your water from your pump, or one of the public pumps, or from the river, but then £12,000 hard cash was funded by the business men of the town or round about. An acre of land at Cawkwell was purchased, the spring harnessed into a tank, thence into an 8" main with fingers off up all the streets. Beautiful sparkling water from a tap! The Company had parliamentary backing but the dividends were limited to 3½% on the £12,000 and so the average charge never exceeded £1.50 or £2.00 a house, and that went on until 1964.

Of course, prior to that, the good merchants had organised the Canal Co., (about 1800) and then the Railway Co., (about 1850) and the Corn Exchange Co (1855), on the site of a Hotel in High Street – later to become the Cinema. All or most of the money to do so was raised by public local subscription. My Mother remembered the barges off-loading outside Old Bank Chambers. Also she remembered when the Market Place was little old cottage shops (all pulled down to make room for the open square, by Lord Stanhope M.P., Lord of the Manor and owner of most of the freeholds).

In the 1920s and 1930s we heard a lot about the Stanhopes. They were titled people in their own right in Kent, and I believe were distinguished in one of the Spanish wars, but they came to Lincolnshire by marriage in 1842 when young Stanhope married a relation of Sir Joseph Banks (her sister married a Hawley, and the estate was divided.) It was the year that my great grandfather George Bell had left the employ of Sir J Muir McKenzie of Delvine in Perthshire to be the agent at Revesby.

George Bell (1804-1872) had been factor on the Delvine Estate in Perthshire for Sir John Muir Mackenzie Bart until at the age of 38 in 1842 he had taken up the post of Land Agent for the Stanhope family on the prestigious Revesby Estate

(former home of Sir Joseph Banks). When he retired George Bell was congratulated as "being a gentleman whose honour and integrity were beyond reproach, as a man of business whose punctuality, courtesy and straightforward dealings were proverbial and as a friend whose sincerity and kindness endeared him to all"

My Father, Hay Bell, and his wife were highly thought of and partly through sentiment, and partly due to his friendship with Hugh Walker, the then present agent, my Father was kept abreast of the various happenings at the Abbey. We also got the low-down on Woodhall, (the Hotchkins and the Weigalls,) every Saturday when Col. Hotchkin called at the office on his way to court.

The Colonel was a wonderful man really, although I was a bit frightened of him. He had such a voice! He had a red face and smelt of perfume or tobacco, which was nice in those days. I knew he was D.S.O. and M.C. because I had to put it on his letters but I never learned which battle. I knew he was in the Lancers, I think about 1896. Of course the Weigalls were talked about and I remember it being a surprise to the Manor House when Sir Archibald became a Baron and chose the title of Woodhall Spa!

Going back to the Stanhopes, Lady Beryl (daughter of Lord Clancarty and an actress) married Hon. Richard Stanhope in 1912. Some 3,000 people welcomed them back to Revesby after their honeymoon. The first welcome address was at Bolingbroke Station, the second at the Abbey Gates when, after speeches, the horses were taken out of the shafts, the main tenant farmers pulled the carriage through the Park to the Abbey steps and a third and final speech of welcome was made. My mother always said how beautiful she looked. But sadly, like some other marriages of important and beautiful people, the marriage was not a success; in fact much unhappiness and scandal. The Hon. Richard was killed in 1916 and our few bits of silver lie in his oak chest which I bought at auction.

But the serious part of the business in those days was auctioneering. In the spring, the front page of the Standard was covered with auction announcements, all in single column. Each firm had its heading under which was a list of its sales. Simons & Co of Boston had the largest following at that time. They could have as many as 25 genuine dispersal farm sales between January and May. Great was the competition, happiness and disappointments.

These sales were executed with the minimum of fuss but with considerable diligence and competence. Each auctioneer had his 'man' (ours was called Housam) and under suitable guidance it was his responsibility to prepare the sale, 'show' the goods, whether small tools in the ring, implements in rows, cattle in the yards, sheep in hurdles, poultry in pens or the horses, which had to be given a "just once more and walk him back".

The auctioneer generally managed to make himself conspicuous. Jack Walter had plus fours, Balderston sent his man out to buy the most bright green coat in the shop, etc. My father confined his attire to a smart mackintosh and trilby hat and always looked good.

The bell was rung, the rules given out and off we went. Most things got sold – there was generally one particular man who would make it his business to take on what we got stuck with, a sort of farmer/dealer. The idea was to keep the

crowd together and the banter going and when all was over, to tot up, balance, glance at the 'unpaid' and go and tell the vendor what a good sale he had had and what it came to and say 80% or so would go into his bank account in the morning, with balance to follow shortly.

We were usually invited for tea. By a cosy fire would be seated the male relatives of the family, surrounded by their good wives serving up ham, beef, pork pie, sandwiches, cakes and tea; and places were duly found for the auctioneer and staff, who were expected to take some sort of lead in the conversations of the day. Such was the normal farm sale of those days, whether big or small. A lot of them were really quite small – there were many small holdings in those days but they all had livestock.

Then of course, where we had a sale, we usually had a valuation of tenant right – and of course we sometimes acted for the ingoer. Each partner might have 15 or 20 valuations to do.

There was some sort of form about these valuations. A date and time were fixed and each valuer was careful to be at least five minutes early as otherwise he would find himself in a more or less untenable position!

Then there was dress, often breeches, leggings and strong brown boots, often a Burberry trench coat. A table and chairs were put together, often in a cold empty room and the valuers sat opposite and wrote their figures in code! The outgoer proffered his claim for ploughing the twenty acres with two horses for wheat after seeds after barley after turnips, etc., etc., and this was all noted down, duly abbreviated, but legible for a 100 years. Then came the claims for seeds and fertilisers, always supported by vouchers, examination and cross examination and then the 'fixtures', labour on manure and home grown feeds fed on the land.

Then they walked the farm. The ingoer's valuer had to check the state of the hedges, fences, gates, ditches and assess the estimated cost of putting things right. In due course the valuers met at one office or the other, went through it all, item by item, usually agreeing the figure. It was always accepted by the client because he had put himself in the hands of his valuer. There was none of this 'referring to client' unless it was something extraordinary. If they could not agree, then the valuers appointed one of their senior brethren to act as arbitrator. They just gave him the facts of the case and he issued his award as soon as he was paid. There was none of this business of 'expert witnesses' forward financial profiles, etc., etc.

All the agricultural valuers in the County paid £2.2.0 a year to the Lincs. Valuers Association which was recognised as the leading association of its kind in the land. You got a green booklet containing the guide figures for ploughing, ditching, etc., a list of members and the scale fee. And they all, with their pupils, met at the Lincoln Stonebow every spring, where the Epton father, son and grandson were always secretary. Then came lunch and speeches.

There were auctioneers clerks and there were articulated clerks. The former included many quite brilliant men. They had to show promise to get an inside

job and they had to prove their worth to keep an office job. So the brighter lads became extremely competent with figures.

Typical examples were Wilf Hodson who started at 13 and who became mayor of Horncastle and an anchor man for some 65 years; Ernest Sutton of Walters who later became the leading accountant in the county; Jesse Baggaley, poet and accountant and many others. The articulated clerks were Midshipmen. Under the indenture of articles they were strictly bound to the service of the master, keeping his secrets, and furthering his good name, avoiding rough taverns and bad company and even marriage without consent. On the other hand they had privileges, accompanied the boss on his outings and shared (most of) his secrets.

He also got a few shillings pocket money over the three year period, for which his father had put down a premium. About 50% became auctioneers.

It may seem odd to say so, but I feel that compared with this age of computers, word processors, circulars, tutorials, seminars and endless glossy brochures, there was a freshness about business in the early days of the 20th Century. Most of our instructions and many of our agreements were verbal; letters (handwritten until 1904) were to the point and telephone conversations likewise (you stood up to it as it was fixed on the wall).

When my father died I found in his wallet six little pages of a notebook, each 3" x 2", beautifully written upon in small legible dark ink on both sides. There one can read to this day such information wanted by a valuer (as an aide memoire) such as all the normal farm workings; a quick way to calculate interest at 3½% in £ s d. ; how to calculate the contents of a round cob, a rectangular corn stack or a water tank in gallons; the allowance for root fertiliser, stocking rate of turnips by sheep – and much more, straight from the shoulder. (one inch square on a 25" old plan equals an acre, so does a halfpenny if squared!)

We used to address envelopes by hand to farmers round about and got to know who lived where. We drew plans of farms and estates on linen and learned something that stayed with you. We called over documents and were expected to get things right.

Office hours were nine to five, half day Wednesday. You came, so Hodson always said, at a quarter to nine but you didn't always leave at five.

There was no such thing as overtime. You took an hour or a day off for a wedding, funeral, etc., and stayed until everything was balanced up. Saturdays were the really busy days. The town buzzer went at 12 and at 12.30 we rang up for the produce market.....poultry in cages, potatoes, plants, firewood, everything but furniture. 5% each way and Hodson had it all balanced off and paid out by 4pm. The farmers started calling in about 2pm and sat their turn on the two old 19c chairs we still have, gazing at the various posters hanging on the wall. When he had balanced, Hodson set to and typed the numerous letters the partners had written during interviews.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Retirement

In the late 1960s, my father, who was approaching his 88th birthday, still looked after Sir John Maitland's and Neil Hotchkins affairs and also did 15 or 20 annual valuations, apart from anything else. The selling of houses was a side of our business where our competitors took it all or nearly all and it was a worry. It was at a time when more and more houses were changing hands and I never personally took to it. So it was that we took steps to find someone to come in. A young man called Mike Perkins applied and seemed very suitable but then it transpired that he really wanted to amalgamate the business he worked for, with ours. We went slow and my father never really cottoned on although he thought they were nice. After my father's death in 1969, I was approached again and finally agreed to some form of jointure but Perkins didn't come to us – instead they sent another and although I protested they were very persuasive and so it lasted some years until Robert came in and then I was asked to retire. I didn't really want to retire and so I kept on but just took what they liked to pay me each year. Eventually, the other partners decided they wished to sell up to the Leeds Building Society for some millions but Robert and I adamantly refused and so since 1988 we have paddled our own canoe. Robert runs the business and I go down and do what I like. I enjoy keeping the big ledger like those in the loft at Mareham, dating from 1885 and to do the income tax accounts, for the few remaining income tax clients. I think I keep abreast of things and here again I've seen some changes.

When I first went into the office a farmer had a choice; either pay tax on what was in theory three times the annual value of his farm – or produce his accounts by 5th June and pay on his profit. He was allowed to alternate this as he chose and so we were





Woodhall Spa Golfing Tour.



Heather and Bob: Teatime at Mareham Grange.

busy doing accounts before 5th June. For many many years Earned Income attracted a reduction of 2/7ths. Then I've been through the old Schedule A register days, Excess Profits Tax, Maintenance claims (on estates), Capital Gains Tax, S.E.T., A.T.B., P.A.Y.E., N.H.I., Herd Basis, average clauses and a few others. And I might mention how involved we used to be with matters like Tithe rent charge, coin rent, Land Tax.

I have always enjoyed playing golf. As agents to Col. Hotchkin we had a family membership in the 1920s and I have played there on and off over the years. When the children were small I was wicked and often went off with a young solicitor called Mike Harrison. Later years I played on Sundays with Tony Gaunt but since my hip operation I have greatly enjoyed playing every Tuesday with the pensioners and every Saturday with the 'Wanderers'. You just turn up at the given hour and slot into a 4-ball. We really enjoy each other's company, and the tea and toast afterwards!

Dick Wingad runs Pensioners – runs them very well, and last autumn he was 85 and gave a party so I pleased him with a little doggerel.

“Oh what will he do at a hundred,
If the Lord should keep him alive,
When he hits every green on a Tuesday
When he is but 85.”

We have a dinner once a year. In the last few years, I have been lucky enough to be invited to go to Scotland with five or six fellows to play four little courses and bridge at night. I am always bottom of the competition.

In 1980 Tony suggested I should buy a lathe so we went to Derby and I bought a Coronet Lathe with motor, sawbench, plainer etc. and I set to and made a grandfather clock. I made the case out of a slab of oak from Woodhall and Tony made the clock and we have our joint names on the face and it stands in the kitchen and keeps perfect time. Then I made a replica 18c Canterbury, some Windsor chairs out of yew and a few other things and in 1993 I made a little bow fronted sewing cabinet out of solid walnut. To bend wood which is $\frac{3}{4}$ " thick. I first made up a steam box, connected by a rubber pipe to the 10 gallon boiler, all still in the orchard, over the brick and clay fireplace. To get the clay, I took a spade and bucket to the green lane adjoining our field called 'The Clays'. I dug – and as I was digging, a lady happened by walking her dog and after the usual civilities, enquired what I was doing to which I replied that I was making a chair!...The good lady went on her way thinking... After this I got a 40 gallon barrel and when the wood was steamed I tried to bend it round, but the barrel ran away. Eventually I dug a hole, borrowed Heather's metal round corn bin and filled the whole with concrete round a sturdy post. We got two strong chairs and this time, when steamed up, Robert and I quickly twisted the chairs tight round the barrel, walnut and protection piece and lo and behold, it bent. We had to repeat this five times but it was satisfying that all six pieces fitted one on top of the other. I made a few other things and so this has been a good hobby.

On and off, I have played several things and although I never excelled at anything, I have enjoyed it and generally hold my own, in ordinary company.

At golf I never got better than a 20 handicap and my best score was 80 gross round Woodhall. I had a hole in one twice, and with John Scholey a few years ago, playing duplicate at the Woodhall Bridge Club, we bid and made two grand slams in one night!

And so the years go by, swifter and even swifter and at 78 I must reflect on a fortunate life whilst being quite prepared for any eventuality. I still look forward to a few holes of golf, an hour or two spent at the office or the workshops and tea by the fire with Heather, and also having that bundle of mischief from Windermere at Easter and the summer. We may even fly to the sunshine and we like to see the garden at Mareham open again for the Red Cross in June and to see how the new wood will grow which I planted last year in the wheat.

Here's a little joke that goes down well when fellows have had just a little drink. A certain solicitor told this tale following an Inquest. An unfortunate man called Mr. Hole had been run down by the train and his mate was the chief witness. As a witness he was shy to a degree, reticent in fact. Counsel was however very



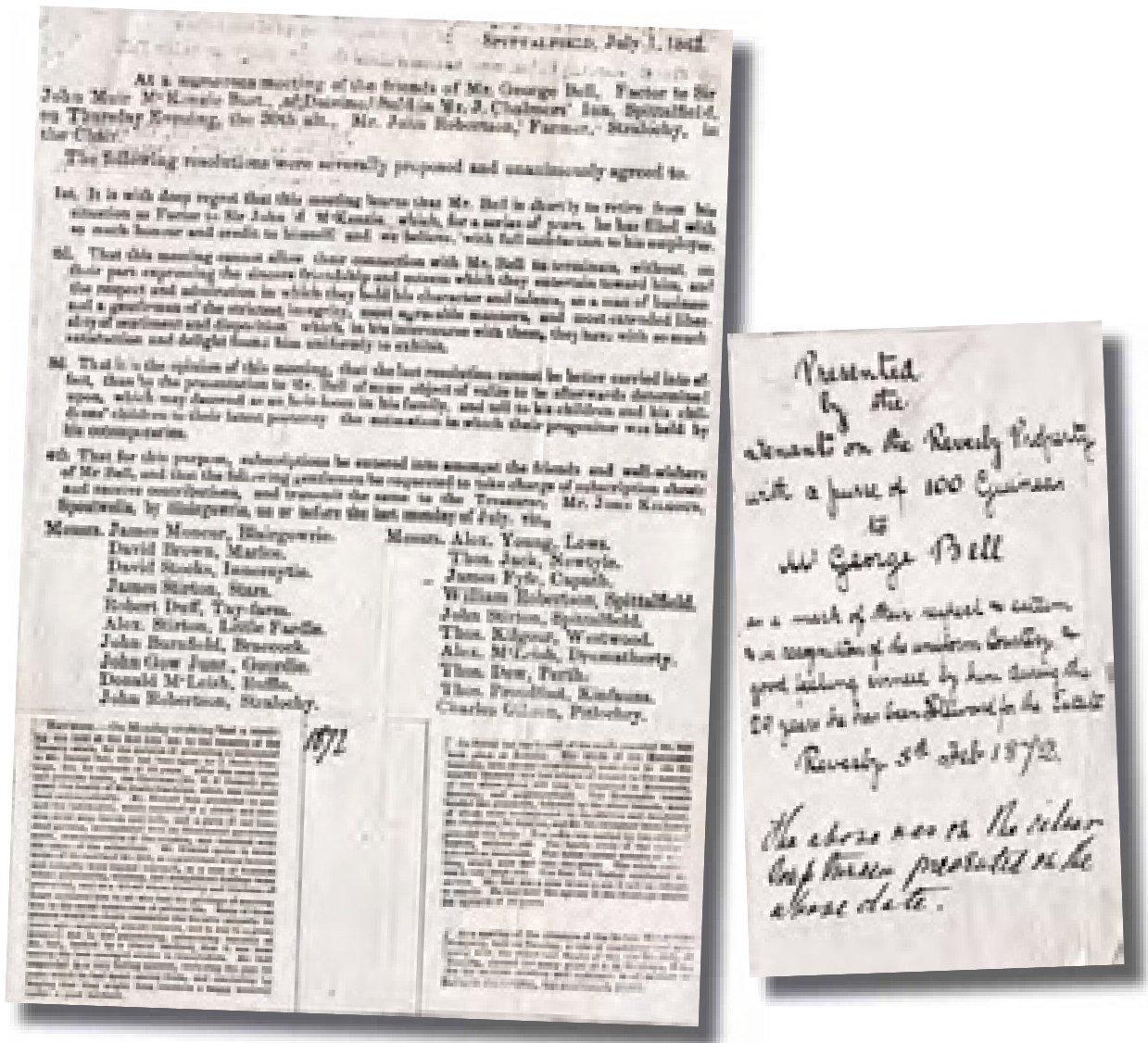
patient and encouraged him by asking him just to recount in his own words what happened. Eventually they got him going and he said, "Well it was like this 'ere – I were walking along the track like and I come across this 'at and I says to myself 'I reckon that's Old 'Ole's 'at' and then I goes a few yards on and I come across an arm and it had a watch on it and I says to myself like 'I reckon that's Old 'Ole's arm' and just then I saw an 'ead and I looks at this here 'ead and I say to myself 'I reckon something's happened to Old 'Ole'!"

Last summer it was gloriously hot and so one day Heather took Lawrie who was six, down to the lake and they had a row in the boat. They looked for fish and saw the waterhen's nest and just lay back and drifted about. By and by, Heather remarked on the number of dragon flies and Lawrie said, "Yes we've learned about them at school."

"It's a pity they only live for a day." said Heather.

"Yes," said Lawrie, "but they mate before they die." And then after a little silence he added, "Granny, you and Grandpa ought to mate before you die!"

1996



100 years of Bell family association with historic Horncastle company

FVAMILY histories are a fascinating subject, not only for those directly descended from a certain line, but for all of us. They give a rare insight into the past and personalise the life and times of those who are no longer with us, bringing them closer, giving us a better understanding of where and how they lived and the problems which they faced in their own lifetime.

Five generations of the Bell family have carried on a deep rooted tradition of service to the community and to the Lincolnshire countryside, since George Bell came to Revesby from Scotland in 1847.

George Bell, like his father before him, had been Factor to Sir John Mair McKinnon, Bart., of Delnaseak, Perthshire for several years and when he retired from that post, he came south. It was said that he had carried out his duties with "much honour and credit to himself".

Friends, who were sorry to see him depart, were reported to say that the "sincere friendship and esteem which they entertain towards him and the respect and affection in which they hold his character and talents, as a man of business and a gentleman of the highest integrity, most agreeable manners and most extended liberality of sentiment and disposition, which in his intercourse with them, they have with so much satisfaction and delight found him uniformly to exhibit".

With this reference to his good character, George Bell travelled to Lincolnshire on horseback, to take up the post of agent for F. Banks Sandilands Esq., a position he held for upwards of 20 years.

At the time he arrived, the Revesby estates were said to be "neglected, and almost ruinous" and it was a great measure due to his painstaking perseverance and industry, that it became one of the best managed estates in Lincolnshire.

It was about the same time as his arrival that Revesby Abbey was rebuilt in the design of John Sept. Watson Esq.

When he retired from his post, Mr Bell was complimented as being, "a gentleman whose honour and integrity were beyond reproach, as a man of business whose punctuality, courtesy and straightforward dealings were proverbial and as a friend whose sincerity and kindness of heart endeared him to all who had the privilege of meeting him in the social intercourse of private life".

When he died in 1872, aged 64 years, he was a hard as a nail fellow, or as was said at the time, "Mr Bell was a man whose pluck it will be difficult to supply". That challenge fell to his surviving relatives.

An example of how his family did carry



Attention focuses on the auctioneer, Mr R.H. Bell, (front right) senior partner in the long established family business of Robert Bell & Company, which now has a century of experience to call upon.

on these traditions of service, was brought to my notice recently, when I came into possession of a copy of the 100 year old indenture and bond papers, which were signed in April 1897, by his son Robert Henry Bell and his grandson, Robert Hay Bell.

On the 3rd of April 1897, at the age of 15, young Robert Hay Bell, who was one of eight children, was attached to Mr W.B. Parish, auctioneer, land valuer and estate agent, of Horncastle. Mr Hay Bell's father farmed at Ransby at this time and later, when he retired he became the landlord of the Red Lion Hotel in Horncastle.

The Bell family association, with the long established company, which has now developed into Robert Bell and Company, Chartered Surveyors, Auctioneers and Land Estate Agents, had begun with the signing of these documents.

As an example of how times have changed, an extract from the Deed of Apprenticeship, for which the apprentice had to pay, reads: "He shall not contract matrimony within the said term, nor play at cards or dice tables or any other unlawful games whereby his said master may have any loss with his own goods or others during the said term, without the licence of his said master shall neither buy nor sell. He shall not hunt, grieve or playbowes nor absent himself from the said masters service day or night, unlawfully." Very strict rules applied in those times, as you can see.

The company history now extends for more than 200 years and the firm agreed to

their present offices, The Old Bank Chambers in the Bell Ring at Horncastle, a mere 125 years past.

The foundations which were laid by Mr R.H. Bell, senior, who was to become Principal of Messrs Parish, Stanford, Walker and Bell, were developed and progressively modernised and his son, also named Robert Hay Bell, joined the partnership.

As Lincolnshire's senior practising auctioneer, Mr R.H. Bell (senior), who lived to be 87 years of age, carried on working right up to the day he died, in May, 1909. He had certainly "taken a leaf" from his grandfather George's book.

He had a tremendous knowledge of agriculture and estate management and his two special interests were in the planting of woodlands and management of waters in the countryside. He was very fond of shooting, fishing and tennis and also played golf.

At the peak of his career Mr Bell successfully managed over 14,000 acres and earned nearly £200. At one time, with the exception of a few yards, he could have walked from the River Witham to Uxby Cross, entirely on land which he either managed or farmed.

He also took a keen interest in the town of Horncastle and rescued historic buildings from decayed buildings at Stew's Cross, incorporating it in his office in 1908. The joy "Tom Thurst" leaved from the same building now graces the top of the company offices.