

It is the 26th April 2025 and this is Woody and Josie interviewing Mary Barrett about their experiences of the second world war and VE Day.

**What year were you born and where?** I was born in London in November 1924.

**Is this where you spent the war?** I lived in Wembley, which is on the outskirts of London.

**And who were you living with during the war and what occupations were they doing?** When the war broke out, I was at the age to leave school because we left school at 14 then so I'd had my 14th birthday, but I was still in education because I enrolled in a commercial course, shorthand typing and bookkeeping. When the war broke out, I then left, and I got a job in London. I wasn't any good at typing or shorthand really, but I was always very good at figures so I got a credit at bookkeeping in the exam. I worked at Chatto & Windus<sup>1</sup>, which is a publishing firm, and that was very interesting because a lot of well known authors used to pop into the office you know, interesting people used to come and go. They used to write interesting letters to our boss and say you know I'm terribly sorry I haven't finished a book yet, I've been staying with a friend so and so's probably someone else well known and he's got a good wine cellar and so I didn't get the book finished and there all his letters is to come in and were always filed and they went round for everybody in the firm to read and so we always kept up to date with what was going on with our authors so that was quite interesting. I was in an office which had three walls full of books, so that was lovely, if you had an odd minute there was always a lovely book to read, and the other thing was if you had a friend who wanted a good book for a present, you could get one at a third of the price, so if you really wanted a lovely book that costs you know it could cost anything it's got pictures, 60 quid, you'd get a third off, which made a very nice present for someone. But I only stayed therefore a few months because my wages were low, I got a pound a week so I went to the Boss, I was sixteen, I knocked on his door, "come in yes" and I looked in and there was Julian Huxley<sup>2</sup> (the evolutionary biologist) in there talking to my boss so I said, "I'll come back later", he said "oh no tell me what it is now". So I said to him "I'm now sixteen years old and I've come to ask for a rise" and he said, "yes for perhaps you had better come back later!". I think I did get a rise which doesn't seem much now but I was given 22 shillings a week, but I didn't think that was very good so I went off and got another a different job. I went through an agency and I got a job with the Orion insurance company and for that I was getting 35 shillings (£1.50).

**How much would a pound have been in today's money?** If you went to the sweet shop now and asked for two ounces of sweets it would cost you, a penny. You could get a children's little lollypop or sherbert dip for a halfpenny. But nevertheless, when you think about it, I was able to pay my fare from Wembley to Trafalgar Square in London out of that.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.penguin.co.uk/about/publishing-houses/vintage/chatto-windus>

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julian\\_Huxley](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julian_Huxley)

**Were you still living at home and what was your father doing?** He was dead at the time and my mother was a widow and unfortunately had four of us children bring up so she had a very hard time.

**What can you remember about the war?** I remember lots of things about the war because I was just 15 when war started. All the schools were shut for a short time because there were no air raid shelters and a lot of places like my school had showers downstairs if you were to swimming, or had sports you could have a shower afterwards, so they were deep, they were turned into air raid shelters. I lived in Wembley so got the train easily up to town. I got a job with Orion insurance company, and this is where I worked all through the war because it was a marine insurance company and all ships were insured for the cargo and for the hull of the ship, so that's what they dealt with mostly, there was a little bit of private, ordinary insurance, but it was mostly shipping and so I did bookkeeping there. I worked in an office in the centre of London. I had to go into town on the train, which could be difficult because when it started to get dark, the planes came over and bombed the railway line quite often and so it usually happened in the morning that you found the line was up, you could only go so far and then you had to get out and just follow the crowd till wherever you could pick up another train. If it was a really bad raid the buses couldn't go because there was rubbish on the road.

**And in an air raid where did you go?** We kept on working! You see the office was a brand new building opposite Lloyds of London right in the very centre of London but it was eight stories high and when there were air raids on you weren't allowed to use the lifts so you could imagine going down eight floors in and out, so we just stayed put. At nighttime, it was worse at night because they put the frighteners on you because every bomb whistled when it came down, and when it went off you thought phew it hasn't got me. They always said you never heard the bomb that hit you. No, but it was frightening.

**Was your street or your house bombed?** We were very fortunate we lost windows, things like that, but my school, which was just a bit further up the road, was hit by a landmine, and it was destroyed towards the end of the war, but luckily it happened at nighttime. It was also the problem of the black out, so there were no bright lines anywhere and a very gloomy time, and the cars had to have some sort of light, but all the headlights were half blacked out so you didn't get much light from them. The blitz wasn't on all through the war, we did have raids all the time, but the blitz was really concentrated.

**Did you have any family members or close friends serving in the forces?** Yes, well, everybody knew someone who was fighting somewhere, of course. I had a cousin in the navy who did survive the war. We weren't such a close family; we weren't writing letters all the time.

**And your brothers they stayed with you? They weren't evacuated?** No, there was a time when it was suggested there would be evacuated to Canada. Yes, a lot of children were evacuated Canada and my brothers were on a list, but they didn't go and the reason for that was that a ship full of our children going to Canada was bombed, and the

ship was lost, the *City of Benares*<sup>3</sup> with all the children so they stopped sending the children. They took the children from London, of course sometimes this was happy, sometimes it wasn't when his children were left with people, some sometimes those people were good to them, and some were not, it was a mixed blessing really, and the parents must have been very, very anxious. I had a friend later on whose daughter had been evacuated. She had been evacuated Yorkshire, and when she came home, her mum couldn't understand a word she said because of the language!

**Did you take part in any VE day celebrations and if so, what did what do they**

**involve?** Well, I can't really remember much about it, I think we were at work, and we came out and just danced about in the street from what I remember. Everybody was jumping up and down and shaking hands and you know we were happy.

It didn't make a lot of difference in the end for we were rationed for about 15 years after the war, but at least we were safer. If you had family that had gone through it, you knew they were safe and that was a wonderful thing because that was a terrible thing, you know losing people during the war. The other good thing was you knew you were going to have a nice night's sleep with no bombs, it was worse for others of course that it wasn't terrible all through the world, it depended where you lived really.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS\\_City\\_of\\_Benares](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_City_of_Benares)