A Place of Dreams

Desire, Deception and a Wartime Coming of Age

Alison Twells

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Cover image: Norah Hodgkinson, 1941, W.W. Winter, Derby. A selection from Norah's archive, Alison Twells, 2025. Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal.

4. A Poke in the Eye for Hitler

For the people of Britain, 1940 was the year the war really began.

It is also the year for which Norah's diary is missing. I am planning a class on J. B. Priestley's radio broadcast in May of that year, in which he repackaged the horror and the lies of the Dunkirk evacuation to tell a story of pluck and heroism, the 'little boats' pitching in to aid the rescue attempt coming to represent ordinary English bravery and a national proclivity to create triumph out of despair.[1] Norah, as we know, had enjoyed Priestley's novels. Certain that she would have approved of his politics and his sentiment, I am hopeful that she had commented on this, the first of the famous 'Postscripts' that made him second in popularity with radio audiences only to Churchill himself. 'Listened to JB Priestley on the wireless tonight', she might have written. 'He was grand'.

But when I open the suitcase to pick out the diary, I discover that 1940 is not there. At first, I am puzzled but not unduly alarmed. I empty the case, put 1938 and 1939 to one side, and then carefully stack the remaining diaries in decade-high towers of ten. 1940 is nowhere to be seen. I look under the piles of papers on my desk and in other boxes of documents from Norah's archive. Not there. I return to my stacks and count them again, working backwards: 2009–2000, 1999–1990, 1989–1980, 1979–1970, 1969–1960, 1959–1950, 1949–1941, 1939, 1938.

For a moment, I doubt that there ever was a 1940 diary. But then I remember my mum reporting a fight with her brother Birdy that Norah had recorded. They'd been squabbling over washing up and he had shoved a dirty dishcloth in her mouth.

'She did have a rough time with him', my mum had laughed. 'It was 1940, so he was 19 or 20 and still tormenting her'.

I gradually move my search further afield: the side of the settee, the recycled paper bin into which items from my desk occasionally fall, the

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garage where I sat drinking tea and transcribing diary entries as I waited for my car to be fixed. But 1940 is nowhere to be found.

By the end of the week, I am waking at 3am, eyes wide and staring, my heart racing, aware that something terrible has happened. It is a feeling reminiscent of the end of a love affair: the fleeting assumption on waking that today is just an ordinary day, then the split-second, pit-of-the-belly realisation, that the world is irrevocably changed. Norah kept her diaries safe for all of those years and then, in the space of a few weeks, I've lost one of them.

I start to obsessively scan the diaries, storing memory sticks in multiple places – at work, at my mum's, in my bedroom. I reason (fully aware that this is the wrong word) that the side of my bed is safer than my office, a tiny box room which adjoins the living room of the upstairs flat next door. The fact that they have a lot of 'comings and goings' – our (very pleasant) neighbour clearly making a bob or two outside of his tenancy agreement – fills me with worry. How careful are they with their cigarette ends? Our downstairs neighbour unwittingly fuels my anxiety: she is indignant that he shouldn't be subletting rooms and if the Housing Association won't intervene in the illegal profiteering, they can at least fit some fire doors. Maybe I should just deposit these diaries in a library, because having them in my house, living in the archive, might send me to an early grave.

There is an accompanying guilt: I have two children in this house and here I am fretting over some old diaries. Indeed, my level of anxiety is on a scale otherwise reserved only for my daughters. Since my first days as a mother, I've worried about them travelling without me, the A1 looming particularly large in my mental map of killer roads. And then there's the out-of-town shopping centre, for a while off limits after a local newsagent told me that its vast basement is stuffed with body bags: 'Waiting for a major incident'. I know how it reads, stark on the page like this. But I am quite secure in the knowledge that other mothers will allow me my maternal neuroses; that they are every mother's prerogative.

My elder daughter texts me from the A14, where she is travelling with her aunt and cousins to visit her nana and grandad in Norwich.

'U will b plzd to knw aunty helen driving at 5 mph', she writes sarcastically. 'In a traffic jam'.

A few minutes later, when my daughter exclaims that a driver pulling off a slip road 'could have killed us all', her aunt tells her gently: 'that's what your mum worries about, the lunatics on the road. It's a mum thing'.

It feels like a mum thing with these diaries too. I am protector of my children's futures and keeper of my family's past. Or maybe it is less healthy than that. Like a guilty bulimic, I try to conceal my diary obsession from my partner. Unsympathetic to my maternal madnesses, he won't take kindly to my new obsession. I binge on them in his absence, dashing upstairs to scan a few more months as he nips to the shop. In a trip to the gym, I can devour two whole years.

The worst of it is, I think I lost 1940 during one of my obsessive manoeuvres. I took them back and forth to my mother's house during those early months after Norah died and wonder now if 1940 fell out of the boot of my car into the February snow. If someone picked it up, even outside her house, they wouldn't know it was ours. The only address is 18 Moira Dale – just round the corner – written on the opening page in Norah's neatly rounded hand.

One afternoon, as we make our way back to my mum's house after a blustery walk with the dog over Daleacre and Eastway fields, we stand outside Number 18, my mum pointing out Norah's sun-filled bedroom above the front door, looking down over what is no longer a cottage garden but a paved car port.

'How times have changed', my mum says, sadly. The once rich red brick fell victim to a cheapskate local authority cladding scheme in the 1980s, just before a sale under 'Right to Buy'.

I make a snap decision. 'Let's see if the diary's been handed in here', I say. I knock and a twenty-something boy answers the door, his arms outstretched against both doorposts and his rangy frame filling the space between. I explain about the diary. It is one of those conversations: do I just launch in with my question, or do I pursue a lengthy but self-conscious preamble, explaining who Norah was, our relationship to the house? I hover painfully between the two. He humours me politely. No, he is sure the diary hasn't turned up there, but yes, he will check and let us know if it has. Trudging back round the corner, we cackle at what he'll report to his family, once the front door is closed and we, a windswept, bedraggled crew, are safely out of earshot.

Fig. 17 Moira Dale, Castle Donington. Number 18 is second from the left. Photo: A. Twells, 2025.

I try to make the best of a bad job. If one has to go, 1940 is *the* diary to lose. 1938 and 1939 give an uninterrupted insight into a schoolgirl's life. 1941 is a crucial log of Norah's early correspondence with Jim the sailor and her first meeting with lover boy Danny. 1940 might mark the start of her sock-knitting career and the year the bombs dropped on Donington, but otherwise, I tell myself, it will be more of the same – school days punctuated by Norah's telegraphic responses to national and local events: 'Sat with Peggy on bus. Coventry bombed. Cathedral destroyed. Terrible' or 'Had biology test. Lousy. Frank joined CD Home Guard'.

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Sitting in the café at work, at a table of creative writers, I find myself lamenting my carelessness, wondering again if I can write this book without a full run of diaries, without this crucial year.

'You could make up some diary entries for that year', someone suggests, a bit too breezily.

Well no, I'm a historian, we don't do that.

'You can use it as an opportunity', says another. 'Have a creative chapter in amidst all the history…'

But why would I, when I've got a story like this?

'Just to help it along', someone else chips in, 'at a point where the sources don't exist'.

'Make it a memoir', suggests some other clever Dick. 'That gives you artistic license. Writers are doing all sorts of exciting things with memoir these days'.

They don't get the magnitude of it, I think. In fact, they look at me with a hint of pity, as though I'm lacking in imagination.

'It's one thing creating a scene from the evidence', I say. 'But I don't have any here. How would I signal the difference, between what is real and what is not?' I see them glazing over at the mere mention of historical truth. But I know that imagining Norah writing her list of crazes – and many historians would disapprove even of that – is a world apart from diary entries that I've made up. They don't think it matters, but for me, it really does.

While I work it out, I do what all good historians do in a crisis. I visit an archive.

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I settle down at a microfiche reader in the Local Studies Library with reels of the *Derby Evening Telegraph*. I have come to see for myself the news that Norah would have read in 1940, her missing-diary year.

I have a good idea from her 1939 entries what Norah will have noted and what will have passed her by. The war crept up on her in the end. After Munich, pleased with Chamberlain and his 'peace in our time', she barely noted international affairs. On the few occasions when she made a war-related entry, her scant attention meant she sometimes got the details wrong. *Hitler made a speech,* she wrote on 29th January, when in fact, Hitler's address to the Reichstag on the sixth anniversary of his coming to power – including his chilling prediction that a world war would see the 'annihilation of the Jewish race' in Europe – came a day later. It seems that thirteen-year-old Norah was writing her diary entries a few days at a time, casting her mind back over the week, world events not feeling so urgent as to require a daily report.

Fuss about Hitler again, wrote a blasé Norah in mid-March, four days after German troops marched into Czechoslovakia. While other diarists noted the Czech humiliation – President Edvard Beneš had been excluded from Munich – and lamented that 'the whole European situation looks almost as black as it did last September',[2] Norah's daily entries drifted into distracted juxtapositions. On 7th April, after a hot-cross bun breakfast and a trip to Isley Walton *violeting* with Helen, Norah noted that *Mussolini marched into Albania* and *Derby beat Portsmouth away* (*2.1*). A fortnight later, Hitler appeared again. *20th April 1939: Nice*

sunny day. The architect came round to look at the houses. Said ours looked nice. Sunbathed in the back. Hitler's birthday.

Maybe it was the Hodgkinson family's very 'homey' spring that led Norah to domesticate the German dictator and to largely ignore the build-up to war. Ten months after the move, they were throwing themselves into the new house with gusto. Norah was busy, helping her brothers to paint the kitchen, dig a vegetable patch in the back garden and sow lawns and borders.

She isn't alone in her reticence. Even a more worldly diarist, like twenty-four-year-old Derby schoolteacher May Smith, who records that Hitler had 'marched into Czechoslovakia – the old devil!' – and notes the enforced ARP (Air Raid Precautions) lectures at work, rebukes herself for her lack of interest. A boyfriend took the political situation very seriously, she writes; 'I suppose one ought'. Jean Lucey Pratt, five years older still, mentions 'the persecution of the Jews' in a diary entry of late March but says nothing more about the international crisis until the end of August, when she seems pleased that 'our foreign policy' was now defined and even wonders if conflict might benefit mankind in the way the Great War had 'hastened the emancipation of women, broke down class prejudice and swept away much stupid social etiquette'. These nonchalant young women. It was the mothers of sons of fighting age who lived in dread.[3]

While Norah notes the trial-run of the *black-out over most of England* in early August, she makes no mention of the WAAF receiving Royal Assent, the *Daily Telegraph* campaign to bring Churchill into government, the declaration by Fascist leader Oswald Mosley that Britons should not die in a 'Jews' quarrel', or *Picture Post*'s urgings for peace. She is in tune with the fifteen Margate holiday makers who take part in a snap poll, eight answering 'no' to the question 'Do you think there will be a war?', four 'yes' and three undecided, and when asked 'Do you think Hitler wants war, or is he bluffing?', all fifteen reply with 'No, he's bluffing'. Even as the nation readies itself and re-armed, the hope remains that the longer Hitler was held at bay, the less likely it is that war would happen at all.[4]

Norah is living in this event, the build up to war, not through it. By early August, she is absorbed in preparations for her sister's wedding, with frock fittings at Pearls Bridalwear in Long Eaton and trips to Loughborough Co-op to help Helen choose her green and gold upholstered front room suite. She knits a tea-cosy wedding present and

spends long days skinning and re-papering walls in the rented cottage down the hill in Hemington, feeling like a bit of tour guide as relatives and friends arrive with gifts of crockery and kitchenware.

The day before the wedding, she and fellow bridesmaid Mary Twells set out the trestle tables and lay out the cutlery for the wedding reception at Moira Dale, persuading Birdy to *sunshine the wazzy*.[5] The garden is in full bloom: roses, hollyhocks, glads in their gaudy glory, the heavenly honey-like fragrance from the phlox.

> *19th August: Helen's wedding day. Awfully nervous. Fell down steps when coming out of chapel. Had lovely feast. I love Len Dakin. Mary & I went to Derby with H[elen] & J[oe] when they went to Bristol. Sunny. Derby lost to Leicester 4.6. Stoke lost to Wolves 2.0.*

That was the only downside. If only the football had gone according to plan. That and Hitler, of course.

The countdown begins. As family and friends enjoy the wedding feast at number 18, Stalin informs Hitler that his foreign secretary, Molotov, is prepared to receive his German counterpart, Von Ribbentrop, in Moscow for the purpose of signing a deal. 'Crisis again', writes diarist Joan Strange. 'Amazing news of a Berlin-Moscow Pact. Sworn enemies but uniting in a non-aggression pact'.[6] With nothing now in the way of Hitler's threatened invasion, tension mounts: nurses are called up, soldiers are inoculated, Poland advises foreigners to leave.

As Marsie, Pop, Helen and Joe travel to London for Dennis and Nollie's wedding the following week – churches and registry offices seeing 'the greatest flood of marriages ever counted in British statistics' – Parliament passes the Emergency Powers (Defence) Act. Volunteers begin filling sandbags and digging trenches. Schoolteachers prepare for evacuation. Art works are moved from the Imperial War Museum and the Tate.[7] Vivienne Hall, a typist in Putney, writes in her diary: 'New hats, frocks, coats, theatres and even holidays are forgotten and replaced by purchase of tinned foods, black curtains and adhesive tape'. But still some remain unconvinced: 'News very bad but we are hopeful in this household that war will not come', writes Joan Strange. 'Mother hasn't got any extra food in, any black stuff for black-outs or even a gas mask'. Marjorie Gothard, a Huddersfield butcher's wife, catches this mood: '[w]e think in our hearts that peace will prevail'.[8]

It is only now that Norah stops to look upwards and outwards. *Worked*, she writes on 30th August. *Trouble with Hitler*. *Lovely, sunny.* And the following day: *Hitler trouble. Tea at Helen's*.

And then, in a rush, it all kicks off:

> *1st September: Hitler declared war on Poland. Had to dye curtains. Everyone got wind-up. Ma went to help evacuation kids in. Not many came. Balloon barrage over Derby. Went to Helen's with Pop. Everyone must have dark curtains. Sunny, cold.*
>
> *2nd: Hitler bombed six Polish citys. Ma went to help with evacuees. Frank had letter from Jean! Chris had fight with Mrs M. in street. Pa went to match. Terrible storm. Four balloons burned down. Derby beat Villa 1.0. Stoke drew 2.2 with Middlesborough.*
>
> *3rd: Got up latish. England declared war on Germany at eleven o'clock. Terrible. Chamberlain spoke on radio and King at 6. Helen & Joe came up. Stormy morn. Sunny.*

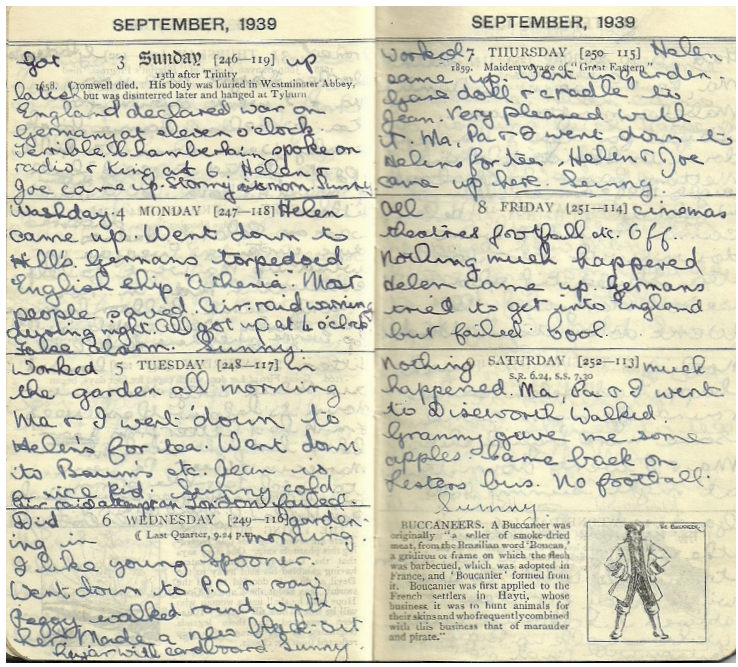

Fig. 18 Norah's diary, early September 1939. Private papers of Norah Hodgkinson. Photo: A. Twells 2025.

As the Government issues gas masks and instructions on what to do in the event of bombing, Norah, like the rest of the nation, expects destruction and chaos. *Germans torpedoed English ship 'Athenia',* she notes on 4th September. *Most people saved. Air raid warning during night.* The following day sees a failed *air raid attempt on London* and on the 6th, Norah and Marsie make new cardboard black-outs for their windows. *8th September: All cinemas, theatres, football etc. off,* Norah writes. *Germans tried to get into England but failed. Cool.* (I read this 'cool' wrongly: Norah is commenting on the autumnal weather and not celebrating, teenage style, the German failure to invade.)

On her return to a new school year in 'Mac's Form', Norah finds the tennis courts lost to air raid shelters. The girls move between classes with their gas masks swinging on their straps. *Had about half a dozen air raid practices,* she writes with a note of irritated exaggeration. *Had to wear outdoor shoes all day.* Her diaries sketch a new wartime topography, as searchlights traverse the sky, aircraft fly low and the colours on the street change to khaki and slate blue. Loughborough town centre has a slightly menacing air. *Nasty*, Norah writes after a lunchtime encounter with a group of soldiers, dismissing as an *ass* the one who takes the liberty of giving her a kiss.

Everyone is ready now.[9] But against this anxious, expectant backdrop of everyday life, *nothing much happened*:

> *9th September: Nothing much happened. Ma, Pa & I went to Diseworth. Walked. Granny gave me some apples. Came back on Lester's bus. No football. Sunny.*
>
> *12th: Nothing much happened. Helen came round. Germans sunk some more English ships. Ma & I went down town at night. Sunny cold.*
>
> *14th: Did some gardening. Helen came up. Nothing much happened. Had some fish from Spooner's. Went down to Hill's.*
>
> *15th: Nothing much happened. Saw Mary. Cleaned my room. Started to read 'John Cornelius' by Hugh Walpole. Sunny warm. Ivy had a daughter.*

While the Germans advance through Poland, the 'Bore War' sets in at home.[10] Norah attends school and does her homework: *finished reading The Knight of the Burning Pestle* (*Thank goodness*). She gardens, blackberries and listens to *Bandwaggon*, now back on the airwaves. She

follows Soo, delighting when he scores for Stoke in a reduced football league. The family enjoys tea parties for Frank's seventeenth birthday and Marsie's fifty-second. Norah knits: a blue jumper, her red and white school scarf, her bolero. Her main concession to wartime seems to be to stay away from the re-opened picture house. She will catch up with *Gone with the Wind* and *The Great Dictator* in 1940.

Christmas – *pheasants for dinner & big tea,* board games and singing at the piano – comes and goes. As they take the decorations down on the 30th, the family relaxes to a music hall turn by Stainless Stephen, a Sheffield comedian. New Year's Eve is so uneventful, it doesn't warrant a diary entry at all.

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I learn from the *Derby Evening Telegraph* that 1940 began not with a bang but with a freeze, as temperatures plummeted, pipes burst, rivers froze and snow drifts kept thousands of children away from school. In the midst of this chill, the coldest winter for forty-five years, rationing began. As the housewife had to register in advance with her chosen retailer, the *DET* was full of ads: 'Join the Meat Rationing Register Now'.

While Derby picture houses remained open, we can safely assume that Norah stayed away. Neither would she have seen Jack Helyer play at the Art Deco Gaumont Palace in January, nor take the bus into town with Marsie to steal a bargain at Ranby's Winter Sale or be wooed at Whitsuntide by Midland Drapery's promise of 'Unrepeatable offers in Dainty Undies'.

'Battle for Narvik', reports the *DET*: 'RAF swoops on Stavanger and the fjords'. I imagine Norah parroting headlines as the Phoney War came to an end and the German invasion of Norway took Britain by surprise. She will surely have reported in her diary the 'Vote of No Confidence in Chamberlain', that 'Churchill [was] head of the War Cabinet now'. On 10th May, the *Blitzkrieg* began. 'Nazis Through Gap', declared a now-frantic *Telegraph*. Was it a relief? Frances Partridge 'felt calmer than for a long time… as if one had lain for ages on the operating table and at last the surgeon was going to begin'.[11]

'EPIC BATTLE!' screamed the *Telegraph* in late May, 'FEROCIOUS FIGHT AT DUNKIRK! ... EPIC WITHDRAWAL GOES ON!' Within weeks, Italy had entered on the side of the Germans, Paris had surrendered and British cities and seaside towns – all unnamed – were under fire. Norah won't have needed the *Telegraph* to tell her about the explosions in Derby on the night of 25th June, or the string of bombs that dropped on Donington a few weeks later: the small explosion in the vicarage paddock, the full incendiary 'bread basket'' on the playing fields on Station Road and a blast on Bond Gate, the impact of which, one local resident recalled, felt as if 'our house had been lifted up and plonked back down again'.[12] We don't know where the Hodgkinsons dashed for cover when the siren started up: the cellars under the Castle Inn, maybe? The shelter on the waste ground down the road? Or, with everything crossed, the cubby hole under their own stairs?

While the Germans could be after any number of local sites – Stanton Iron Works, Crossley Premier Gas Engines, Toton railway sidings, Chilwell Depot – it was Rolls Royce, nine miles away in Derby, that they really wanted. Royce's had made most of the Allied engines during the Great War. This time, their Merlins powered the Lancaster and Mosquito bombers and the Hawker Hurricane and the Spitfire fighters that were about to come into their own in the Battle of Britain.

Did Norah know that from above, Royce's site on Nightingale Road looked like a residential district, the sheds and stores disguised as houses and roads, the water tower and big glass engine workshop now a church and chapel, all transformed by Derby portrait painter Ernest Townsend into a work of art? Had she heard talk about the 'dummy town' in the fields around the villages, 'starfish sites' with wooden posts and wires that lit up at night, circling the south of the city like a glistening necklace of fire, fooling the Germans that Derby was already ablaze? A 'wizard war', Churchill called it.[13]

If the *Telegraph* was restricted in its coverage of the raids, it threw its weight behind the ARP, naming and shaming torch-flashers, bonfire-lighters and other offenders too free and easy with car headlights and bicycle lamps. These firefighting auxiliaries had done a full days' work before embarking on black-out surveillance, the editor told his complaining readers, who saw them as jumped up, play-acting lackeys

of the police. The morale-boosting public services of the WVS also got good copy, their whist drives, mobile canteens and food convoys, complex evacuation successes, coordination of Bundles for Britain, Saucepans for Spitfires, and wool supplies for 'comforts' all duly reported. The Local Defence Volunteers (later the Home Guard) was 500,000 strong by end of June, Birdy and Frank among their number. Fears of Fifth Columnists were met by the internment of 'enemy aliens' and removal of road signs and railway signage as the country imagined German airmen dropping like bats in the dusk sky.[14]

In early September, after months of news censorship, London came into view, as if from the cockpit of a plane emerging from thick cloud. Woolwich Arsenal, Royal Victoria Docks, Surrey Docks, the Elephant and Castle, the East End, even Buckingham Palace, all ablaze and all named, photographs showing St. Paul's miraculously escaping damage against a fire-livid sky. 'Terrific AA Fire: Big Dog Fights', reports the *DET*. 'Tremendous Air Battle: Waves of Nazis over Thames'.

In November, the Luftwaffe turned its attention to another provincial Blitz. For local historian Delia Richards, this night forms her earliest memory: held in her father's arms at their landing window in Castle Donington, he pointed to the distant orange glow that was Coventry on fire. Just down the hill in Hemington, along the road from Norah's pregnant married sister, six-year-old evacuee Geoffrey Abel was woken from his bed and led out into the darkness to stand on the railway bridge and watch the flaming night sky. As ports and industrial cities – some named, some not – came under attack, the nation tried to adjust to a fearful sleep-deprived 'front line life'.[15]

Knitting crops up in unexpected places.

'Almost every time a man was asked if he needed anything, the reply was "we could do with a good pair of socks"', reported Mr Fletcher, secretary of the Derby and Derbyshire Chamber of Commerce and organiser of the Tennant Street Soldier's Rest, present with the Lord Mayor and other notables to greet the first exhausted Dunkirk survivors on 4th June with some cheering words and the proceeds of a whip-round organised by Rolls Royce. 'Considering what they have been through, I think it is the least that we can do to see that this need is met'.

In between escorting customers to their seats, torches in hand, and the final lights-up at the end, usherettes at the Gaumont Palace spent their time knitting. 'I saw Mr Smidmore [the manager] wading about in a welter of wool, needles, Balaclava helmets, scarves, mittens, pullovers and the like', wrote the *Telegraph* reporter, 'and giving advice to would-be knitters as if knitting and not cinema management was his work. But, as he said, we all find ourselves doing queer jobs these days'.[16]

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Women and girls knitting 'comforts' for men who were not their own kin had been pioneered by the newly-formed Red Cross during the 1899–1902 South African War. By WW1, knitting for troops had become a 'national mania'. The surfeit of woollen goods sent to France saw men using the surplus socks and comforters to clean their rifles and wipe their cups and plates. During WW2, the number of knitting parties grew (to between 6,000 and 7,000 by April 1943) and the Red Cross was joined by the Women's Institute, the WVS and more organisations to distribute wool, collect finished garments and send them to servicemen at home and overseas.[17]

Wartime knitting was viewed as part of a reciprocal relationship: men fighting to protect women and children; women and girls deploying their domestic skills to provide 'comforts' and care. It wasn't altogether fair. Servicewomen had to knit their own woollies. 'One day word went round our camp that the Padre had issued knitted pullovers to some of the Airmen', wrote Eileen Davison for the BBC People's War project, 'but although in many instances we women did the same work as the men, there were no garments for us'. Despite their protest, they were told they were 'quite capable' of working full time and 'knitting their own'.[18]

Popular representations of wartime knitting as exclusively performed by women for men obscure finer details and small subversions. The initial spur for the emergence of 'knitting parties' was levels of anxiety among women; that is, to calm and comfort women themselves. Boys also knitted, at home and school, as did some men. In *Mr Lucky*, a 1943 romance, tough career-gambler Cary Grant allowed an Englishwoman to teach him to knit, his willingness and look of intense concentration

endearing him to the female cinema-going public. 'Can you help me?' he asked. 'I dropped my purl. I'm beginning to like it'.[19]

Knitting was also feared as an espionage tool. 'Spies have been known to work code messages into knitting, embroidery, hooked rugs etc.', wrote the authors of *A Guide to Codes and Signals* in 1943. 'Small knots are tied at certain intervals in the threads of yarn. When unravelled, the thread is placed alongside a decoder and the spacing of the knots reveals the letters of the secret message'.[20]

And then we have the schoolgirls. School logbooks reveal that parcels of knitted woollies and other gifts were often shared between prisoners of war, the British Ship Adoption Society and their own adopted ships, and that letters were sent in return. 'Two extremely interesting ones this time', records Radnor Girls' in Cardiff in May 1945. 'Girls should gain considerably from this correspondence and also from the American letters, a second batch of which were received yesterday'. Timetables were suspended as sailors were received as guests.[21]

Of course, what the schools hoped their pupils would gain from these encounters may well have been at odds with the girls' own views. Joan Bakewell describes a fictional school assembly where girls shamelessly scrutinise merchant seamen, becoming helpless with laughter at the headteacher's choice of hymn, 'Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring'. In a similar vein, BBC People's War contributor Edith Wilshaw remembered a ship's captain coming to visit her Nottingham school to thank the girls for their letters and knitted comforts: 'he was gorgeous'.[22]

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Tracking down a sock-knitter is my aim when, during a moment of purposeful Googling, I stumble across Loughborough High School Old Girls' Association (OGA). In the helpful email exchange that follows, I am invited to write a short piece for the newsletter, describing Norah's diaries and her correspondence with Jim the sailor. I enclose two photographs from Norah's collection, one of three teachers and the other of Norah, her best friend Peggy Stevens and another girl, Betty Garrod, sitting on a bench in the grassy quad. I drop in a few more memory-prompting names, including Norah's crush from the summer of 1938,

Bernard Limb. 'I would love to hear from anybody who remembers digging the trench with the Grammar School boys during the Munich Crisis', I tell them, 'and who maybe' – just maybe – 'was a schoolgirl knitter'.

Mary Belton's reply arrives in my pigeonhole at the end of a busy term.

> Dear Alison,
>
> I was very interested to read in the recent Loughborough Old Girls' Newsletter your article about LHS during the war years. I was actually there at the same time and in the same form as Norah. I remember all the names on your list and recognise Norah and Peggy in the photograph…
>
> I too knitted for the war effort and sent sea boot stockings to the navy. I too had a letter from one of the recipients who had been torpedoed and survived but when I replied to his new ship my letter was returned undelivered so I never knew what happened to him. I do remember that I was summoned to Miss Bristol's office to receive the letter and told to be sure to show it to my mother! Miss Bristol was very protective of her 'gairls'.
>
> We always had to have an emergency ration box with us in case we had to stay long in the air raid shelter. I am afraid that mine was very much depleted when I did need it as the contents were very tempting at lunch and break times.
>
> If I can help in any way with other memories I would love to hear from you. There can't be many of us left!
>
> Yours sincerely,
>
> Mary Belton (Freeman)

Mrs Belton's maiden name rings a bell and after a bit of scrabbling around in Norah's archive, I find that she was one of three girls on a slightly blurred photograph that was taken at the same time as the one I'd sent to the OGA: 'Bettina Hurd, Kathleen Clowes, Mary Freeman, 1941'. She also crops up in Norah's autograph album, her cheekier contribution following verses from Tennyson and Keats by Marsie and Pop, a few worthy entries from teachers and the jokey rhymes of other family and friends. 'Two in a hammock, attempting to kiss', she writes. 'When all of a sudden, they ended like (written upside down) THIS. (Mary Freeman, 26.1.38)'.

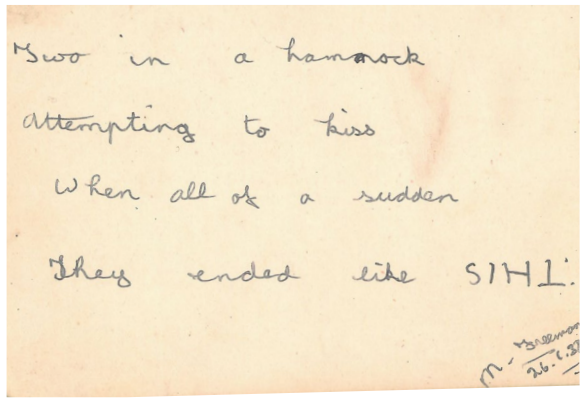

Fig. 19 Mary Belton's autograph, 1938. Private papers of Norah Hodgkinson.

A few weeks later, I am sitting in Mary Belton's front room, examining a scroll-like photograph of her year group at Loughborough Girls High School. It takes us a moment to identify Norah, with her short side-pinned bob and broad smile. Mary, neat and slender, is slightly obscured by the wild blonde mane of the girl in front. All are in their summer dresses, the variety of blue, green, yellow, pink and brown pin-stripes muted to grey and white. The year is 1941 and this is their last term at school.

Mrs Belton had started in the Upper III at Loughborough High School on the same day as Norah, 17th September 1936, after passing the scholarship with an A1. She and Norah were in the same form for all five years, leaving after the Oxford Certificate exams in July 1941. While Norah took a job at the railway office in Derby, Mary began work with the Post Office in Leicester. Put off by the nightshifts in the black-out, she moved to Standard Telephones and Cables. She was relieved to discover that her comptometer training meant she was exempt from the call-up and did her bit by working as an air raid warden and manning the switchboards in Birstall village hall.

I am surprised at how much Mrs Belton reminds me of Norah. It is not so much her appearance, although, like Norah, she could easily be a decade younger than her eighty-six years. Most of all, it is her voice. High School elocution lessons have not erased her flat East Midlands vowels, but just like Norah's, her tone is clear as a bell.

Mrs Belton can't remember the trench-digging operations with the Grammar School boys in September 1938. 'I probably wasn't that active in the digging!' she laughs. 'But we would have been excited at mixing with the boys. We were always under such strict instruction to keep apart. It was the same at home. It was always "it's not ladylike" to do this and that and the other. So when we had the opportunity – well, we did like to have fun'. It was a bus ride with the boys that made going back on Saturday mornings – the punishment for too many 'order marks' – more bearable.

Miss MacKenzie, Mary and Norah's form tutor in 1939, a fierce Scot who taught French and took a party of girls to Paris every year, had lost her fiancé during the Great War. At every Remembrance Day service, the girls would study her face intently, waiting until she cried.

'We were cruel'. Mary's voice betrays amusement as well as remorse. 'And not just to her. A lot of these teachers, they were ready for retirement, but they were brought back, you know, because of the war'. She tells me about the ageing Miss Freer, their form tutor in the Upper V, known for her mass of grey hair and the hand-knitted faun stockings, thick and ribbed, that she wore all year round. 'We all used to laugh at her, poor soul. I remember during a particularly harsh winter, she travelled to school on skis'. The 1940 freeze goes through my mind and I wonder if Norah will have mentioned in her missing diary this minor act of teacherly eccentricity and devotion.

As well as her memory of her empty ration box – the chocolate-covered raisins and caramel wafers from the Home & Colonial proving just too tempting to leave alone – Mrs Belton shares a rich assortment of images of life as a schoolgirl in the Second World War. There was the compulsory gas mask banging against her chest. The beetroot sandwiches (done in vinegar and seasoned with salt and pepper) that by lunchtime had dyed her bread bright pink. The cocoa and Camp coffee, brought in from home, to add to the third-pint of milk (warmed in winter) provided by the school. The siren scuppering home-time and the chilly evenings spent in the air raid shelter beneath the tennis courts.

And the knitting.

Like Norah, Mrs Belton was a proficient knitter, taught by her mother as a young girl of eight or nine. She sounds almost surprised at her expansive range: balaclava helmets, sleeveless pullovers, many scarves in Air Force blue. She tells me about the rib, which ensured the garments

held their shape. The thick dark navy wool for the sea boot socks was untreated, oily, with the lanolin still in.

'We knitted these great long socks that would turn over their sea boots. But we had big pins, so they soon grew'. Turning a heel was skilled work and picking up the stitches along the side of a sock took patience and practice.

'You took your knitting with you everywhere', Mary tells me, remembering knitting on the school bus and while sitting on the cloister wall as sportier girls went off to practice tennis. When working on the switchboard, women would knit all day, in between answering calls. 'I even remember going to the cinema at Birstall and knitting in the dark!'

There wasn't much that a young girl could do to help the war effort. The National Service Act (No. 2) of December 1940 had seen women drafted into the services, munitions and work on the land, but did not apply to schoolgirls, of course. But if they were knitters... Friendly letters, your best photo, a hand-knitted balaclava or pair of socks: they all helped servicemen to 'smile through'. 'We felt virtuous', Mary says proudly, 'like we were really doing our bit'.

The sailor who received Mary's socks wrote to her. She remembers her nervousness on being 'sent for' by the head teacher, Miss Bristol, who handed her the letter 'with the strict instruction to make sure that my mother knew about it'. Theirs was a one-off correspondence. 'I can't even remember his name now', she tells me. 'It was a pencil-written letter, very – to us it was almost illiterate, it was just a piece of paper ripped out of an exercise book, thanking me. His ship had been torpedoed and he got the socks when he came back. I wrote back to his new ship – all eager and keen – but it came back "not known" and that was the end of it'.

I tell Mary about Norah's letters from Jim. 'I would guess he came from a similar family to ours', I say; 'not very well off, father in a manual job. There were a lot of children and a number of them passed the scholarship. But not him'. I mention Jim's shocking possessive apostrophes and poor spelling. 'Norah was clearly keen to correspond, but would she have felt...' I search for the right phrase.

'... that he was beneath her?' Matter-of-factly, Mrs Belton finishes my question. 'Maybe. Unless that it made it more exciting. To us, so far from the sea, we knew nothing about sailors at all'.[23]

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After our chat, it isn't difficult to picture fifteen-year-old Norah standing in the school hall one autumn day in 1940, listening attentively to a bustling woman in green and grey tweed regaling her audience. They weren't half formidable, these WVS types. Impressive, but a bit of a snob-show: Marsie had helped them out at the start of the war, but they weren't her cup of tea. Yet they certainly got things done. They'd done a grand job of finding homes for all those kiddies with their funny Brummie and Yorkshire accents. Now they were branching out, collecting hosiery to send to Coventry, and pots and pans, colanders, meat-covers and heaven knows what else for the 'Saucepans for Spitfires' campaign. 'Up housewives and at 'em!' as Herbert Morrison had said.

It seemed that socks were the next big thing. The lady was braying about how the WVS had been handing out comforts since Dunkirk and was now collecting five tons of knitting a month. Five tons! Soon she was waving a paper pattern in the air, outlining the options: scarves for the less accomplished knitters, and balaclavas and sea-boot socks for those who could shape a neck and turn a heel. 'Come on girls. Get those pins clicking. It'll be a poke in the eye for Hitler'.[24]

That's me, Norah thought. She could do that. She'd been knitting since she was a little girl, when she'd sat on the kitchen table at Hill Top, legs dangling and crossed at the ankles, concentrating through a furrowed brow on her pins, uncomfortably secured in each armpit, to ever-patient Marsie's words: 'in with the needle, round with the wool...' She was so proud of her lovely green cardigan which that last winter, 1939, had taken her less than a month to complete.

Did the imperious lady visitor echo *Woman's Own* and tell the girls to include their names and contact details with their comforts?[25] I think she did – the boys would want to know whom to thank. But she emphasised it should be their school and not their home addresses. You couldn't be too careful, in this day and age.

Norah was keen. This year, she would spring into action. Socks were easy, even those great long sea-boot things. And besides, she quite liked the idea of knitting socks for sailors.