

Andrew Helbling – interviewed in 2019 by Martin Vye

We are in the house of Kathleen and Denis Ratcliffe in Barham and with us is Andrew Helbling whose father Strib Helbling was in the Secret Army during the Second World War and we're going to discuss what Andrew knows about what his father did. Andrew, perhaps you could say when you first knew that your father had been involved in this.

It's a good question, I don't remember. I think it was after he died that I actually knew he was a member, which is a shame because I could never ask him about it. Yes, I don't know where the information came from but then I suddenly discovered he was part of it. I'd known about the Secret Army since mid/late Fifties, but I had no idea he had anything to do with it.

I should add that Strib Helbling farmed at Duskin Farm up Covet Lane from Kingston. This was clearly an area where you could escape into the woods I guess, presumably that's why they chose it. Perhaps you would like to say a bit about the terrain and why it might have been chosen.

Yes certainly think they looked for farmers and suchlike people, Peter Fleming was in it and a number of other people that started it going in the first place. They were all friends together as far as I know I think they were all members of the rugger club and joined. Their hidey hole was in Gorsley Wood which was a little bit further away from us. Yes you could well hide in those woods which indeed they did. I think they used to have a lovely time running round in those woods setting booby traps and suchlike.

Do you know what their intention was if the Germans had invaded, do you know what their job was?

Their job was to lie low until the Germans had gone past and then come out of their hidey hole with sabotage equipment, explosives and suchlike and their job was to disrupt the enemy and the supply routes and so forth, blow up railways, blow up the main road. Life expectancy I believe was about week or a fortnight or less and they could then go back into their hideout which was a relieve quite extraordinary on the side of a pit in Gorsley Wood and they climbed down inside a hollow tree and the way out was another hollow tree leading out into the pit. But I gather you could walk along the path within inches of the entrance and never see it. They would spend I believe two or three nights a week in that. It was serious stuff.

The had learnt at Garth over at Wye devilish sort of things of how to kill people silently and how to string wires across the road and all the sabotage things that at the time was quite a revolutionary idea.

Do you know whether it was set up quickly in 1940 or had it been prepared beforehand do you know?

Kent had the very first units and in fact were set up before the rest of England set up units and that was before the war that they started to set up units with an idea of

realising that we were likely to be invaded and that we were likely to need some sort of guerrilla unit to stay behind enemy lines. So Kent and I would think the groups round here were I would think the very first of all.

In conversation you've mentioned Bridge. I know that wasn't your father's area but there were numerous groups and I think you've mentioned what was planned for Bridge Hill. Perhaps you'd like to describe what the aim of their activity was.

Bridge Hill, I don't know whether that was Secret Army or regular army but I can remember halfway down Bridge Hill, an iron pipe sticking out of the bank where the plan was to flood Bridge Hill and therefore Bridge with petrol if the Germans came through which of course would really upset them quite a lot. And looking back you think crikey, what a dreadful thing to do but in a situation of total war flooding Bridge with petrol seemed like a sensible thing to do.

It sounds horrendous, the man who was telling me about it said that he was told he would have to throw something with spikes on, so that when the motor cyclists went through – no the first wave would go through, it was the second wave they would catch with these spikes – which would burst the tyres when they went over them. So that's the one bit of information that I did know from Bridge Hill.

It may have been a little later that the petrol idea was tried because they had the same thing at Sandwich Bay and again I can remember the pipes, the iron pipes all over the beach at Sandwich Bay where again the plan was to flood Pegwell Bay with petrol should there be an invasion fleet. Petrol floats of course so float it on the water and set a match to it. That was definitely a plan that was organised.

The Bridge group I don't know because I believe these groups didn't know each other and didn't know what the others were doing. They were kept very secret from each other.

Do you know whether the idea would be that there would be no senior command, they would be left to themselves as far as you understand?

There was a certain measure of senior command, certainly on their training and so forth and that was actually controlled from Garth which is the house at Wye, as you go along the Ashford road towards Wye it's on the right there, set in the middle of the field actually. That was their headquarters where they went and did their training etc.

If the invasion had happened...?

They'd have gone completely to ground.

And do what they'd been trained to do, use their own initiative I guess.

Totally use their own initiative and I gather they were very, very good at it and impressed the army by their ability. Because a lot of them were gamekeepers and so on, so hiding in the countryside and crawling in the bushes and not be seen was what most of them

were very good at and what at that time the army was extremely bad at. It was very much of the guerrilla warfare that we've seen ever since.

Did your father get any medal or anything to indicate at the end of the war that he'd been part of this?

I don't think so, I don't think anybody did. It was far too secret and that's why none of them ever talked about it because it was instilled in to them at that time, absolutely everybody that you didn't tell anybody. Most of them didn't tell their wives.

I think it was also a forgotten army after the war. Nothing came out until we saw this programme on television and that wasn't actually in Kent I think that was in the Scottish area.

There have been a number of books and there are quite a number of books. One was on Thanet where twin farmers whose name escapes me, twin brothers in different units and it wasn't until thirty years or more after the war that they realised that the other brother, the twin brother was in their own unit. They'd never spoken about it between them and they had no idea. That degree of secrecy was total.

It's like that generation didn't talk like our parents didn't tell us anything. Trying to do family history now is more difficult than asking your parents about it. It just wasn't talked about and this is the same thing.

That's why they weren't part of the Home Guard and as far as the general population was concerned, what are those idle people doing? They don't do anything for the war. And they could never say "I'm going out every night working jolly hard." It had to be completely secret. It was secret to the extent that the British army didn't know it existed.

So if people like the Lovat Scouts who came down and were training them in matters of guerrilla warfare. So the Lovat Scouts had no idea until fairly recently that their men were here. All their supplies and equipment and ammunition came into Ashford and were then sent to Canterbury to I forget where and in fact stopped half way and went to the Secret Army. But the destination of those supplies was completely secret and there was no record of it at all from bottom to top. Amazing that you can keep these things secret, quite extraordinary.

Did they have radio equipment?

Oh yes. They had their uniform and they had proper equipment, explosives and guns and sticky bombs and all these things that the Home Guard didn't have.

What did the wives think the men were doing when they went out?

I believe there was quite a lot of strife on that account. "You're always out every night where do you go?" To which there was no answer and to which obvious conclusions were drawn by the wives. Yes, it caused some distress I would think. Going to the pub of course or something else and of course they couldn't say. "Why don't you join the Home Guard and do your bit?" And you can't say. They had a difficult job.

I thought they were drawn from the Home Guard.

No, they were completely separate. That was the whole point of it, it was secret. That's why the Secret Army.

How did they get recruited into it?

Friends. Purely by friends. You know, "Excuse me. You're a good chap will you come and join, I've got this little group thing."

Somebody had to start it. How did the first person get to do it?

Yes I've got that information that D.D.D., there's information on there. Information is available. Peter Fleming was one of the very earliest ones starting it. Ian Fleming's brother who lived round here. They spent a lot of time round here.

He stayed at the Duck at Pett Bottom too. There's a sign up about Ian Fleming.

Indeed and James Bond was born in the house opposite, in the what do you call it house, which if you read the book it gives a great description of where James Bond was actually born.

And allegedly 007, it still exists, as the number of a bus going from Dover to Canterbury.

That's apocryphal yes, it's certainly all round here. Certainly the Secret Army was very secret indeed and they did some quite extraordinary things.

But somebody must have come up with the idea and started the first people.

That was in '1938/'39. Then they realised that France would be overrun and we were going to be able to do nothing about it. They started making plans very early, 1940 then it spread throughout the rest of the country. There were many, many units all over the country but again long before S.O.E. and of these things, the French Resistance was started.

I suppose there would have been some in Norfolk too. I was in Norwich during the war, Thorpe St Andrew on the Great Yarmouth side of Norwich.

Yes and then they used to go out and do their exercises every night and creep about and so forth which I was saying earlier the time when they decided to attack the big gun in Bishopsbourne, the big cross Channel gun, a huge, whopping great one. I can remember them firing it once and it brought our ceilings down miles away. It used to hide in the tunnel at Bishopsbourne at Lenhall Farm. That group decided to go and attack it and they crept in quietly. They had plasticene to pretend and sticky tape to stick all over the gun. The guard hadn't seen them coming or anything and Jack French was actually sitting on top of the barrel right up near the roof of the tunnel sticking this plasticene on when they were caught. It was a Scottish regiment that were guarding it

and of course they were nearly shot, very nearly shot. To explain “No, no we’re English, we’re just practising” of course “That’s what you say”. It was really touch and go but they were certainly able to say “Your gun is blown up and no more.” It was rather fun.

And the other one again, father had died and I wish I could have spoken to him about it, when George Pellett leaned towards me and said,

“Did your father ever tell you about the time he set fire to the Westgate Towers?”

It would appear that for a bit of fun they set fire to the Westgate Towers. I can remember after the war going round the Westgate Towers on a tour and being told about this medieval fire well now I know it wasn’t, it was father in the war. He thought he’d wake up the guard which presumably it did.

So they performed a function in keeping guards on their toes.

Indeed yes and this is how they practised by creeping up on people and leaving a note “Your dead” and creeping away again without being seen. It had its lighter moments I fancy.

What age were they in the war?

Twenty nine father must have been because he was born in 1909/1910, so he would have been twenty nine.

Because they were in agriculture they wouldn’t have been called up I guess, is that the situation?

It was preferred occupation so they wouldn’t have been called up and then once they joined they still wouldn’t have been called up though quite how they would make the excuses, words would have been quietly said in Whitehall in the right places.

As they were secret, nobody knew what they were, the wives didn’t see them in action, and they wouldn’t have a uniform.

No they had uniform. They would put their uniform on and go out at night.

How can we find out how we can see a uniform?

Home Guard uniform. I’ve got a photograph somewhere of father sitting there in his Home Guard uniform but that was much later in about 1944 because it was disbanded wasn’t it in about 1942 I think. When the threat of invasion receded then they were stood down. Most of them just joined the Home Guard.

Well if you have any written information or photographic information we would like to include that as well because you can’t just make a documentary without showing various photographs.

I was looking for the photograph and of course I couldn't find it. Peter Williams of course, the television he's got a copy of it.

I'm in touch with Peter we serve on the same committees so Ill have a word with him.

Splendid man. I went over with the photographs to the TV studios in Maidstone and he'd got little portacabins at the back and he said "Come and have a look" and I went next door where they were making one of the films of the Secret Army for the television series. I had an amazing twenty, forty minutes I should think sitting there watching them taking a bit of film, put the bit of film there and then spread that and put that bit and then add the commentary and then seeing how it's cut and spliced these films to make the professional and to realise how long, what an enormous amount of time it takes. Ages of getting it, cutting it, to watch a professional was something else.

What we need is something else, the film can't just be us talking. We have to have photographs and take them to various locations to put into it. Otherwise it will be just boring.

There's nothing to see but we could go up to the edge of Gorsley Wood and I'm pretty certain I know which track it is. There's a track that goes in eventually towards Charlton Park area.

Yes, it's along there. I thought it was on the left but I could be wrong. I went and looked once but couldn't find it so I'm not absolutely sure where it is.

You could pan round and give an idea of the terrain which is wooded. You can quite see people melting into the woods and disappearing.

You'd have to superimpose some people so we need a photograph of somebody in uniform and superimpose them.

I'm afraid my uniform has got moth and I can't get it into it anymore.

What were you in?

I was in the T.A. for a few years with the 4th Buffs which is no more. So I've done my bit of time at playing soldiers.

So any pictures, photographs that we could add into this film would be most appreciated if you could find anything.

Andrew this is to do with the Bridge History Society project and I've been wanting very much to interview people involved in farming in the wider district. Perhaps you could say a bit about how you, your family began farming in the area.

Yes indeed. My parents, mother was brought up in Epsom. Her father was a bank manager and various other things, a city man. Father's father was Hong Kong Shanghai Bank and he was brought in, it wasn't Shanghai it was close by there in China and he

joined the bank, but how he met mother I can't say. They decided they were going to go farming and rented I presume High Heaselands at the back of Barham. It was a small holding where they kept chickens, that was before the war. I'm not sure how long they were there and then they moved to Oakleigh at Bekesbourne where again they kept chickens. Then in 1942 got the chance of Duskin Farm which was farmed by somebody who got thrown out by the WAR AG?? They had the power to do that, if somebody wasn't producing food they could throw them out and put somebody else in. We'd have an almighty scream if they did it now.

So they moved to Duskin Farm I was born at Bekesbourne at Oakleigh and then moved when I was two. I was just a war baby really, November 1939, so we moved to Duskin farm where we farmed and then I have a hazy memory of cows and chickens and things. My parents separated and I think it was then that mother planted apples. We grew quite a lot of apples and cattle and sheep and suchlike. I went to college and came back and carried on with cattle and sheep.

It should be said that many of us know and remember the Duskin apple juice which was sold certainly in Bridge and still is.

It's sold in Scotland in Castle Douglas.

It's certainly sold on Skye. I've just got an order that came yesterday from Denmark. There's one shop there that they come and collect it. It's about all over the place.

Yes we grew apples but it got more difficult as the supermarkets got more picky with what they wanted and the size of the apples had to be bigger and we were really too high at 250 feet above sea level to grow the quality. Life got steadily more difficult so we started making apple juice so now we don't grow apples anymore but buy in from round about and sell apple juice. So the wheels change and things slowly move on and change.

I've always thought the Covet Lane Valley and indeed seen from Marley Lane, fairly marginal land but on the other hand it sounds as though farms can work on that land.

The soil is very poor in terms of nutrients but actually the soil is quite good on Duskin Farm, a bit like the Pett Valley. There are patches where the soil is really quite deep, an awful lot of stones.

Is it clay with flint?

No it's head brick earth but if you look at it on a geological map it's head brick earth which means on the top of the valley which means that most of the brick earth has been washed down to Ash or somewhere and we're left with the stones, but it's not bad. On the sides of the valley, the steeper bits, it's very much chalk. On the tops of the hills it's clay with flint.

Just generally I'm interested in the pattern of ownership and farming. I think I know Covet Land and around there but over the hill you've got Ham Farm and

Horsehead Farm, the people who live in the farms are not working the land are they?

No, Horsehead Farm now is a consultant. They have not too much land with horses. Ham Farm is now someone who breeds pheasants in enormous numbers, perhaps he does turkeys as well. Most of the land of Ham Farm and Horsehead top field there is owned by Graham Tompsett who lives at the top of Railway Hill in Barham. His father Brian Tompsett owned Horsehead farm and his wife was Ham Farm. She was a Maddocks.

I'm interested in the way in which ownership has changed.

I think Horsehead has been owned by Brian Tompsett's father, he was blind and he had a dairy herd and you used to hear him up there calling to the cows, because being blind he couldn't go and fetch them. He had to wait until they came in and then he would milk them and set them out again, for years. Quite extraordinary. They moved to a small holding at Ickham somewhere. Think of being a dairy farmer and blind.

Finally, we've talked about woods in connection with the Secret Army. There's a lot of Forestry Commission and private forest. When you were a child was there less forest or has it in your lifetime been a lot of woodland around?

It's always been there I think. There were various woods at Duskin Farm that were grubbed out with a grant from the Government but they were only small woods. By and large it's always been the same. I don't know when the Forestry took on those woods.

Towards the end of the First World War I guess.

Could well be a lot of that was planted. Down at Water Company Woods that were sold, they were owned by the water company at the pumping station.

We bought Duskin Farm in '47/'48 from the Marquis of Conyngham so that was through the Conyngham Estate who still owns Bridge Pett Farm. The Countess of Seaford was another one. How these ownerships vary.

When did you start producing apple juice?

1980.