

This piece was kindly written by Mrs Margaret Mc Birnie retired teacher of co-founder Emma Ranson Bellamy.



MAKE DO AND MEND

I was born in January 1945, just four months before the Second World War ended, so although I have no memories of the traumas and deprivations of the war, I grew up in an era when the after effects of the war were still clearly felt. Rationing of many basic commodities was still part of everyday life, and the wartime ethos of "MAKE DO AND MEND" (i.e. use things again and again), "DIG FOR VICTORY" (i.e. grow your own food) were maxims by which my parents lived.

However, I did not feel in anyway that my childhood was deprived. There were many families who lived near

us who were far worse off financially than we were. My father commuted daily by train to London from our Essex home, where he worked in a clerical capacity in an office, so we had a regular income. My Mother did not go out to work (respectable women of those times did not work outside the home) in spite of her training as a Junior School teacher.



During the war the majority of factories and workshops producing "luxury" goods were adapted to produce essentials for the war effort, so such things as toys were every difficult to obtain. Once the war ended it took a long time for entrepreneurs to set up new businesses. For example, the Christmas just before my fifth birthday, my parents bought me a beautiful shop-made dolls' pram, but two years earlier my Christmas present was a doll's house that my Mother had made herself from wooden orange boxed brought from the local greengrocer. She had made an excellent job of it, covering the interior walls with odd bits of off-cuts of wall paper, fixing up a battery in the roof space to light up small torch bulbs in the ceiling of each of the rooms, and using a set of small metal windows and a door that she had purchased from a shop. Some of the furniture she had made herself, and various relatives had been secretly primed before Christmas to obtain or make different bits of furniture, and send them a presents.

It was not uncommon to receive gifts of toys that people had made themselves, or to receive toys that had been preserved from before the war. I still have in my possession now a china dolls' tea-set that I was given one Christmas which an antiques expert has

informed me was made in about 1900! Of course, it is quite valuable now. The first doll I had was one with a china head and probably was made in late Victorian times, but sadly it was later broken. I also still have a set of coloured wooden building bricks, that not only did I play with, but my children had them, and now by grandchildren have them! Children were expected to look after their things much more carefully because they would not get replacements. How many of the toys children have today are likely to be passed down to the next generation still in a useable condition?

Books were always obtainable, but not in the quantities which we enjoy now. Each Christmas one of the presents I shared with my brother was a Rupert the Bear annual. I also have a toddlers' picture book from the immediate post-war period which is about an imaginary barrage balloon called Bertie who becomes a hero by bringing down a German fighter plane over London and then marries a "girl barrage balloon" called Belinda. What a subject to amuse three year olds with!

CONSERVATION and RECYCLING are important words in today's society, but were more or less unheard of during my childhood, and yet our lifestyles were such that we were unwittingly doing those things most of the time.

GLASS – there were no plastic bottles, cans of drink or cartons; every liquid came in a glass bottle or jar, and there were no bottle banks. However, my Mother reused jam jars over and over again when she made her own jam or marmalade, sometimes using fruit from the garden. Bottles that had contained squash or fizzy drinks could be returned to the shop for a small refund: the same applied to medicine bottles, bottles that had contained alcohol and many more. Milk bottles were collected by the milkman, sterilised at the dairy and reused many times over. Many children from poor families took advantage of the penny refund system by asking people for their empty bottles, returning them to the shops and collecting the refunds for themselves and their families.



PAPER – old newspapers, envelopes and other bits of paper were used to start the open coal fires that everyone had in the main rooms of the house. Some poorer people cut up the newspapers into squares and they were used as toilet paper. At Christmas time my Mother made us take off the wrapping paper from our presents very carefully and she would fold it all and put it away for next year. The same was done with bits of string which were kept in a small brown box. Only many years later did I realise that that small brown box was an empty wartime gas mask holder. Nothing useful was ever thrown away!

LARGE ITEMS – everything was reused if possible. An old armchair with the springs broken was taken to pieces and the wooden frame chopped up for kindling for the fire; an old saucepan with no handle became a freshwater bowl for the chickens and my once much loved dolls' house with all its internal parts stripped out and covered in waterproof felting, eventually became a second chicken house. Finally, if no possible secondary use for something could be devised, it was given to the RAG AND BONE

MAN. He was an elderly man who scraped a poor living for himself by driving his horse and cart around the countryside calling "Any old rags and bones" and accepting any rubbish which he then sorted and sold on to scrap metal merchants, paper factories or wherever he could.

THROWAWAY SOCIETY – we are used to using something once then throwing it away; this rarely happened then. There were no paper tissues, we used linen handkerchiefs. How I hated the smell of my Mother boiling handkerchiefs in an old saucepan on the stove in order to sterilise them!) Babies wore terry towelling nappies, there were no disposable ones; dish cloths and other cleaning cloths were washed and reused.

SHOPPING BAGS – there were no plastic carrier bags. Women used shopping bags made from a variety of materials, although quite a lot of shops could provide you with a strong brown paper carrier bag if necessary. These were alright so long as it wasn't raining, for when wet they would split and send the contents of your bag all over the pavement.

PACKAGING – apart from jars and tins, most commodities were sold loose in the shops. The grocer, for example would weigh a bag of sultanas from the big sack or barrel in his shop so all you had in terms of packaging was a paper bag which could be used on the coal fire. Shopping took more time because the shopkeeper served each customer separately, but as housewives didn't go out to work, there was enough time to shop in this way. Biscuits were displayed in large tins with glass tops so that you could see the varieties available. Poorer people could ask for a pennyworth of broken mixed biscuits or buy yesterday's bread and cakes for a few pence. Again, everything was wrapped in paper bags.

RATIONING for many food items remained for along time. My Mother had to register with one butcher and all her meat purchases had to be made at his shop alone. So much meat was allowed per week for each member of the family, and as she bought certain items, so the butcher tore the appropriate ticket out of the ration books (one for each family member). We supplemented the meat ration by keeping chickens and rabbits. These animals were not pets – they were a food source and nothing else. Neither my Mother nor Father could quite bring themselves to kill one of the animals, so they asked a local man to do it, who did so quite happily for the gift of a packet of ten cigarettes. But then my Mother would clean out the chicken and de-feather it ready for cooking. Chicken meat was a delicacy for Christmas or Easter dinner (it was unknown in most households except on special occasions). The rabbits also were occasional meals. I can remember helping my Mother remove the feather from the chicken when I was very young. I grew up looking upon such tasks as completely normal, and do not and do not still feel at all squeamish about such things including eating rabbit as a meal.

LEFTOVERS – there were very few as we were encouraged to eat up everything we were given, but if there were any, they went to feed the rabbits, cat or chickens, or the wild birds, or they were composted for use in the garden.

SWEETS – also were on ration. Many is the time I can recall my Mother using the weekly sweet ration to buy a Mars Bar, which she then sliced thinly giving each of us a slice before wrapping over the paper at the end to preserve it for the next day. That way the Mars Bar could last for about three days.

PET FOOD – was not, as far as I remember, rationed, simply because there wasn't any! We fed our cat on scraps from our own plates or on such things as boiled fish heads and other offal that we got from the fish shop or the butchers. The rabbits were fed on carrots, outside leaves from green vegetables, and natural green vegetation that we collected from the fields such as dandelions, thistles and clover. Finely ground cereals, corn and bran could be bought from the farm animal food shop to feed the chickens. When we had some pet fish (sticklebacks caught from the local pond) we fed them on ants' eggs which we dug up from the ant's nests at the end of the garden.

CLOTHES – were on ration. My Mother saved our coupons to be used on things that she did not want us using that were second-hand, such as underwear and shoes. This meant that many of our clothes were home-made, hand-knitted or HAND-ME-DOWNS from friends and family. One early photograph of me shows me sitting on the front doorstep aged just two, wearing a grey fur coat that my Mother had fashioned for me out of an old fur jacket of hers that had worn out. Another photograph shows my Father digging in the garden wearing the sailor's white top and bell-bottoms trousers that he had worn when called up to the Royal Navy during the war. When clothes wore out, they were used for all sorts of things; Dad's underwear made excellent dusters; a felt beret was a furniture polishing cloth; old towels became floor cloths; knitted items were unravelled, the wool washed, and knitted into new things; the yearly pair of Clarks children's sandals in the summer, had its toes cut out at the end of the summer when my feet had grown, to make them last a few weeks longer; and when all else failed, clothes were cut into small strips and made into rag rugs. Household linen was equally scarce; when a sheet became thin and worn in the middle, the sheet was cut in half lengthwise and sewn up so that the worn parts were now on the edges and the "good" parts in the middle – a process known as SIDES-TO-MIDDLE. This made a very uncomfortable seam to lie on in bed.

HOLIDAYS AND ENTERTAINMENT – with fewer and less sophisticated toys, play had to be more inventive. From an early age, I was expected to help at home, learn to sew and knit and amuse myself. I read, particularly a set of children's encyclopaedias which helped my general knowledge, (not having a television from which to learn things), and I listened to the radio a lot. We played board games and make-believe games. There were days out to Southend (although the beach there was stony and not suitable for much play) and a few enjoyable holidays to stay with my Grandmother who lived in Worcestershire or to stay in a primitive cottage without electricity owned by my Uncle near the sea at Walton-on-the-Naze. Going abroad for a holiday was unheard of.

SCHOOL – was in a village about two miles away and we travelled by bus – wartime "utility" vehicle which meant that the seats were not upholstered but made of wooden slats, such seats leaving a very memorable and literal impression upon my person! School dinners were abysmal – no choice, poorly cooked, stodgy puddings and all custard or milk puddings made with National Dried Milk (some idea left over from the war) which gave the food a revolting cardboard sort of taste. However, we did receive one third of a pint of fresh milk a day to be drunk at morning break. These little bottles had a cardboard top instead of tin foil. And the centre could be poke out to insert a straw. Our teacher collected and cleaned these tops and we used them in some of our craft lessons. Nothing went to waste! Even the leftovers from the awful school dinners were put into big tubs and sent to local farmers to make pigswill. On the plus side, I

can remember the “oohs and ahs” when our teacher revealed some new brightly coloured knitting wool for craft lessons, which was among some of the first new equipment the school had obtained post-war. Our school was also privileged to be among the first in the county to obtain some new PE equipment, but as we had no hall, it could only be used outside in the summer.

When Mrs Mc Birnie heard of the Save a bit spend a bit project a conversation quickly began about the ideas of saving money and ‘things’ was not a new one but one of necessity in the time post war rationing. We very much hope that you enjoy reading it with your children, maybe you have your own stories or could ask the children to speak to their own grand (or great grandparents) about their own experiences of rationing saving and ‘making do and mending’