

BOLTON REMEMBERS THE WAR

Transcript of interview with Vincent Southern (VS) • Schoolboy

Interviewed by Ken Beevers (K) 08.06.2005

K: What's your name?

VS: My name is Vincent Neville Southern.

K: And when were you born?

VS: 1930.

K: And whereabouts?

VS: I was born in Farnworth, in Rawson Street.

K: At home?

VS: No, at Nurse Wholey's which was a private nursing home in Farnworth.

K: Can you just tell me again what your Father did?

VS: My Father was a chief WPO radio officer, on board the ships that sailed out of Liverpool.

K: And where did you go to school?

VS: Firstly, my first school that I went to was St Stephen's at Kearsley. When my Father passed away in 1937, unfortunately, I had to go and live with my Grandmother, but I had a marvellous childhood. I had a wonderful, marvellous time. When I look back on it now, we were perhaps the silver spoon children that they talk about. I went to Holy Trinity School at Prestolee, for a short time, and then I moved on and went to St Saviour's School, at Ringley.

K: And brothers and sisters, you had..?

VS: I had no brothers, but I had two sisters. My sister Pauline, Pauline Valerie, she was born in 1932, and my other sister Dawn, Dawn Marie, she was ten weeks old when my Father died.

K: You would be nine years old, do you remember the moment you heard that War had been declared... or?

VS: Yes, being in a little village of Ringley, Stoneclough and Ringley, it sort of was a talking point as people were stopping... and actually, I think that I was in a shop that was called Gerrard's, Maggie Gerrard's pie shop and cake shop, when I heard these people talking about, that War had broke out. As a boy of nine years of age, it didn't mean a great lot at that time.

K: How did life at school change, during the War?

VS: Erm... very little really. We still used to get our milk in the little bottles, where you used to press the cardboard centre in, with the little hole in. We used to get that just the same at school and as I've said, I was very fortunate my living at a place called Kearsley Vale House in Stoneclough, which belonged to Fletcher's Paper Mill, we had a very good life and we never wanted for anything in food or clothing or anything at all. So I was, yes, very lucky. Even though I had lost my Father, we were very lucky the other way.

K: Did you have a gas mask?

VS: Yes, I still have my gas mask actually. I still have it in the original cardboard box upstairs, with a little bit of string on!

K: Did you use it?

VS: Never had to use it, no. No you used to carry it to school and back and you used to keep it under your desk in case you needed, you know, in case anything happened, but no. We put it on, we used to have practices of putting it on in case there was an emergency, but it was never, ever needed to be used.

K: Did you have a school uniform?

VS: No, no we didn't. We didn't have school uniforms in those days.

K: What about air raids, were you ever involved in an air raid at all?

VS: Well, the air raids that we talk about... We were fortunate at Vale House, instead of going upstairs and going to bed, we used to go downstairs into the cellars at Vale House which were where the barrels of beer were kept and many, many other things were kept down there and there was a big Robin Hood boiler that used to be the heating appliance that heated the whole of Vale House... So we had our bunk beds and our ordinary beds, my Grandmother and my

Mother's bed and spare beds down there, in case any of the family, because there was quite a few aunties and uncles, and we lived down there. But the fire escape door, which we had down in the cellar at Vale House, used to go out towards the tennis courts, which were at the back of Vale House, and overlooking the back of the then Kearsley Power Station. And, of course, looking out towards Clifton and Manchester you could see a lot of the fires and the bombs dropping, and the searchlights searching across the sky, the barrage balloons that were there to be able to stop bombers coming in, to be able to get near enough to be able to bomb the places. I don't know why, I don't know how the barrage balloons were supposed to stop them, because, obviously they would be higher than that if they were dropping the bombs, but at that time, it must have been a deterrent, or something. Actually, it was a marker wasn't it? That there was something important there, but probably no-one thought about that at that time.

K: Go back a little bit, to just explain what Vale House was and why you were living there.

VS: Vale House was the house which belonged to, originally, it used to be Mr Fletcher and Miss Fletcher, his daughter, who carried on at the paper mill, they also had another paper mill at Greenfield, which I believe is still there. They used to manufacture cigarette paper, very, very fine cigarette paper at Fletcher's paper mill, and may I add the Queen used to use Fletcher's toilet paper or Fletcher's Paper specifically for you-know-what! Which was something that a lot of people didn't know, other than people that were connected with the paper mill, because, of course, it did carry the Royal Crest because she used it.

K: Was it very high quality?

VS: Yes, that was perhaps the reason.

K: So, your grandad was the..?

VS: My Grandfather, Grandfather Albert, he passed away prior to me being born, but he was connected with the horses and carriages at Fletcher's paper mill and of course my Grandmother, she used to live at 142 Market Street, Stoneclough... where my Mother, Uncle Edward, Uncle Richard, Auntie Bertha, Auntie Alice and my Mother, of course, they were all born there at 142 Market Street, and moved into Vale House and lived at Vale House for a long time. My Uncle Richard, he used to work at Fletcher's as a joiner, and he used to get on his motorbike in the back yard at Vale House and drive down the drive, straight through the lodge at Fletcher's paper mill, get his clocking on card, clock on and drive down to the joiners shop at Fletcher's paper mill which means he would travel, what 500 yards? (laughs) But he used to go to work on his motorbike. You remember these things as a child, because it used to take him longer to get the damn bike started sometimes that to walk down the drive. And the funny thing about it was that those houses on Market Street there, the short row, belonged to the paper mill. They were actually built for the paper mill workers. Of which you did in a lot of industries in those days, but funny thing, again, coincidence, my Grandmother, when she came out of Vale House. The house number they gave her back was 142 Market Street, and that was absolutely unbelievable really to think that she'd been in Vale House and she'd been the cook and the housekeeper to the Fletcher family for all those years, and yet she went back to the house where the family had all been born in.

K: So did Vale House become the Social Club?

VS: Yes it did, it became the social club, it became Fletcher's Social Club.

K: So during the War, there was rationing, so did you remember..?

VS: Yes, there was, there was rationing, I remember it quite well. We used to go to Guest's shop, which was next door to Maggie Gerrard's at the bottom of the drive way at Vale House, the two shops are now combined, I think, into something else. It was the village hardware shop and many other things. It was a bicycle shop, they used to sell and repair bikes and tyres and valves and anything connected with bicycles. And, of course, it was a sweetshop and many other bits and pieces they used to sell, in the hardware side, and then, of course, a little bit further along Market Street was Seddon's grocers, of which Jimmy Seddon, his family, they lived there. You know, we were well supplied with shops, the newsagents on the right hand side of Market Street, knocked down and gone now, Sixsmith's that was. And then we had the Co-op a little bit further along on the left hand side, just before you turned right over the bridge, to go across to Prestolee and then, of course, the Post Office, which is still there. And up by the side of the Co-op was a chip shop - a wooden chip shop, a wooden building, a wooden tongue and groove building. The people that had it were distantly related, which the majority of people were that lived in Ringley and Stoneclough at that time. The Ingham family, we were part and parcel, the Booths, the Southernns and the Inghams were all inter-related and I still have a cousin Douglas, that lives down in Stoneclough, lives over the bridge in Stoneclough now. There were also, at

the end of Hulme Road, there were two little shops along there, there was a little toffee shop on the corner and next to that was again, a fish and chip shop, and they were the same, they were wooden buildings, they wouldn't be accepted today, of course (laughs) by the Health and Safety and the fire people. And they didn't get broken into, because, of course, there wasn't vandalism in those days, not like there is now. I mean, they'd just have a little puny lock on the door like you know, but people didn't go about thieving and stealing the same that they do now. A little bit further down, of course, prior to having got down to Hulme Road, was Doctor Eames' surgery, which is now the Conservative Club, but it used to be Doctor Eames and one of my Mother's aunts was the housekeeper there at Doctor Eames' surgery. And there was a little farm in-between Vale House and Doctor Eames' which was called Tittle Farm, which was next door to Vale House, where a little driveway went through, where Fletcher's had a big paper storage place at the back of there for the wood pulp. They had a big storage place at the back of there and Tittle Farm was right on that corner, it's demolished and gone now, there are houses there.

K: So if your Grandmother was the cook...

VS: The cook and housekeeper, yes.

K: Was there any shortage of food?

VS: No, none whatever. None whatever. I've told the story again, many, many times about my Grandmother used to make a delicacy called Rat Pie. People say 'You're joking. You are joking!' I say 'No, I'm not joking at all' my Grandmother used to make rat pie, but it wasn't the rats that we're talking about, sewer rats or anything these were bred rats that were fed the right thing and everything and once the meat had been taken off you couldn't tell whether it was rabbit, chicken... You couldn't tell. You didn't know, but it was actually rat pie, you would eat it and not know the difference. Just the same as eating horse flesh that we used to eat, you know, during the Wartime years, we used to eat horse flesh, because of the shortage of cattle I don't know, but...

K: You mentioned to me on the phone, about the air raid.

VS: Well, the air raids that were happening in and around Manchester, you know, we used to watch from this door in the cellar. Like I said, we could come up these steps at the cellar at the back and we used to be able to watch the bombers going over, like I say, searchlights and everything and watch the fires in Manchester as the bombs had been dropped. And there was one bomber that was looking for the power station at Kearsley, which was on Hulme Road, which was Kearsley Power Station. And this plane was following the railway track that used to come down from Linnyshaw Moss that was over towards Walkden. Because every night they used to bring a full train full of coal into the power station at Ringley. And of course, the track runs down and runs under the railway bridge at Manchester Road, Bolton Road, Kearsley, next to Stoneclough Brow, next to Stoneclough Road, and went down past the back of Fishbrook Dyeing Company and went into the power station at Ringley. This train driver that was driving this train, and this fireman, suddenly realized that this plane kept circling and was following them all the way along, and he didn't know why, but he thought, well, the only thing they can see - because there are no lights on the train - the only thing that he could be following was of course, the stack of the smoke from the engine going along and of course, the sparks an' that were flying out from the coal that was being burnt. This plane kept circling and was following along the train track and the driver decided there was something wrong, and I don't know whether he ever got awarded a medal or anything, but he should have been, because he stopped the engine under the railway bridge at Manchester Road/Bolton Road, by the side of the White Horse Pub. So the plane suddenly lost whatever it was following in the dark, and it circled round quite a few times, and then it unloaded its bombs, and dropped a bomb on the largest building which it could see, which was the Farnworth and Kearsley Co-operative Society shop and butchers on Springfield Road, Kearsley, directly facing - by coincidence - my Mother's house, which was 189 Springfield Road, Kearsley. And I remember after we'd heard this tremendous bang, which was very close... The following morning my uncle, Richard, who also lived on Springfield Road, 135 Springfield Road, he arrived at my Grandmother's, on his motorcycle, which was, of course, Vale House, because my Grandmother had stayed there on that particular night... And he shouted in the back yard 'Mary, Mary!' so my Mother went to the window, he said 'You'd better get dressed and get up to your house' she said 'Why, what's the matter?' He said 'You don't need to bring your front door key. There's only half of your house left'. So of course, my Mother got dressed and we had to stay with grandma, and she went up to the house and, of course, that was quite so, the bomb had dropped, demolished virtually the whole of the Co-operative Society and a lot more, and blown all the windows and doors and the houses were imbedded with shrapnel and shrapnel had gone right through the windows. Fortunately there was no-one

killed, no-one at all killed, and I have, of course, some of the shrapnel here, that was dug out of the wall at my Mother's house and I've always kept it. I've had that since that year.

K: Were there any other air raids that..?

VS: There were air raids, yes. There were air raids which the bombs dropped here in Bolton, but that was the nearest to Ringley, Stoneclough, was the one that dropped at Kearsley and of course, like I say, the ones that they dropped at Manchester when they were after the places, the whole length along the River Irwell, which they followed. Funnily enough, they never, ever, bombed Pilkington's Tiles or Exide and Drydex Batteries which were virtually next door to one another. Two very, very large buildings and two large employers of local people. They didn't bomb them for some reason, I don't know why, why they passed them, they must have thought they were no interest of anything. Yet, at Exide and Drydex Batteries that was of great interest to them really, because that was the place that they made the submarine batteries that used to power the submarines. You know there were 2-24 and 3-36 and 4-48 class submarines and that didn't mean anything, apart from the fact that was the amount of batteries that used to be in one of those submarines to be able to carry on driving it. I mean... and these batteries were massive, they were a hell of a size... and when you reckon up there were 448 in some of those ships... I mean, that was a tremendous amount of weight put into a submarine. But funnily enough they never bombed it. They got down into Salford, of course, and to Manchester, and of course from the back of Vale House, if you looked across beyond the power station and look down the valley where the river used to run right down, you could see straight down there. You could see the flash in the sky. You could see the fires and you could see the smoke, you know, which was going during the day time, and these fires and explosions at night, you could see. But that was the nearest we ever actually got to them.

K: You had all the food you needed didn't you?

VS: Yes, we were never, ever, short of anything. Because the directors of the paper mill made sure that we had everything. Like I say I have some interesting bits and pieces that I've always saved and different schools I've had a look at them, ration books with, of course, all the sweets that we were allowed and the coupons have gone out for those. But the clothing and other things... I still have all the original coupons in the ration books there. I have the old notes, you know, the old monetary system, ten shilling notes and things like that. Some of the badges of the WVS, of which my Mother... a lot of ladies were connected with the Women's Voluntary Service.

K: What did you do for entertainment in the War?

VS: Well it, there was entertainment with Fletcher's, being the club that was connected to the paper mill. It was sort of the focal point of the village. There used to be dances at night time, potato pie suppers, there used to be weddings that were held there because, of course, there was a nice big dance floor and of course, that dance floor, you could slide the doors across at the back and make use of the conservatory, which made the place a lot bigger still. They had beetle drives, domino drives and all that type of thing that went on. They had rummage sales, so that people, you know there wasn't as much rummage because people had to wear things a lot longer. They used to make their own clothing, they used to knit and sew and mend and darn socks and everything, of which people do none of those things now, but they did in those days, yeah. People used to come from all round to Vale House. It wasn't open on a Sunday. Prestolee and Ringley, Prestolee, Stoneclough and Ringley are two different parts. They are very, very different indeed, past the Horseshoe and past St Saviour's Church into Ringley, you go into what was nicknamed 'Sleepy Valley' you went further down, where you walk down into Giant's Seat and down into the locks, Brideson's Lock, Neville Brideson, his dad was the lock keeper down there. Sometimes we come back along the canal, on the barges, from there the men that were taking cotton bales, and coal and that down on there on these barges and other things. Taking clay down to Pilkington's Tile Works. We used to get rides on some of these barges, and then get off at the lock which was nearest the back of Fletcher's paper mill. There was a lock there, and we used to get off there and then walk back, yeah.

K: What did you do in school holidays? That sort of thing that you just been talking about?

VS: Yes, we used to do that. You know, we used to go round, run around a lot together, quite a gang. We'd play football and we'd play cricket and, like I say, we were very, very fortunate to be able to live at Vale House and have so many things to be able to keep us occupied and entertained. Because we could go and watch the people who come at lunchtime. They would come and have a game of tennis at the back, and we were able to watch that. We were able to do a lot of things. We had pear trees, apple trees, and everything in the grounds at Vale House. Crab apple - my Grandma used to have us collected crab apples and jelly, which was a home-made jam. Blackcurrants and raspberries, which Jack Lucas, Dinky Lucas, the gardener... he

had them all, planted all round and... we were self-sufficient in a lot of ways. We were having Sunday lunch, I used to have to go down on a Sunday morning to the mint garden and pick fresh mint and bring it back in to the kitchen at Vale House and I used to have a little, like a little wheel thing, as I used to have to chop and cut this mint with before my Grandmother made the mint sauce for the Sunday roast.

K: Did you go into Bolton much?

VS: I came into Bolton when I came to school. When I left St Saviour's school, I came to Lord's Commercial Institute on Manchester Road, Bolton, which was over the top of then, Parker's Garage, which is now the BMW garage, next to Parker Ellison's Pelso Works. My Mother paid for both our Pauline and me to be able to further our education there and obviously we had short pants and three quarter socks and everything and I went to school there until I was fourteen, and where I learned typing and shorthand and accountancy and my first job, I went into accountancy at the age of fourteen. I left school on the Friday and started work on the Monday morning, five and a half days, for a company named Mather, Kay and Hudson, which were in Acresfield at Bolton, which is now demolished. Acresfield was the continuation of Mawdesley Street. Of course, it is now all covered over with the Crompton Centre now, where Acresfield used to stand. But my Grandmother... She wouldn't let me have long pants until I was sixteen years of age! so I started work in short pants and three quarter socks. I didn't like it of course, at first, but it was advantageous because I used to keep my school cap in my pocket, of which we had a school uniform at Lords College, the blazer and the school cap, and I used to put my school cap on when I got on the tram, at the Black Horse. A lot of people, of course, always said the Black Horse at Farnworth, but it isn't, the Black Horse is in Kearsley. One side of the... the right hand side coming from Bolton... the right hand side of Market Street is in Farnworth and the left hand side from Holland's school upwards is in Kearsley. So the tram used to turn round in Kearsley, and I used to get on the tram with my school cap, and I used to put my school cap on and I was able to travel to Bolton for half fare. He didn't know that I was working, the conductor. I used to occasionally go to the fish market, which was behind Newport Street in those days. Magee's had a store there where they used to store all the spirits and everything, a Bond, and next door to that was the fish market, and then, of course, the trolley bus station, and trams used to be at the back of there, used to go up to Deane, Daubhill and Plodder Lane, and Tyldesley and Leigh and etc used to go from there. I used to be given a half crown every now and again to be able to collect the fresh fish from the market when I'd finished school. And if you spent, I'm not sure if it's two shillings or half a crown, but one of the things, if you spent that these people at the fish market, where my Grandma had already placed her order, they used to give you a free rabbit. And you used to get a rabbit for your charge to take home, so I used to get fish in one lot of bags and a rabbit in the other, yeah! (laughs)

K: Even during the War?

VS: Yes, yes, that was during the Wartime years, because, obviously, like I say. I finished school when I was fourteen and started work which was 1944, prior to the War finishing. And I used to go to another shop on... facing the Town Hall, on the Square there, and I used to have to go for this, a little paper bag of cream of tartar, of which my Grandmother used to put in her scones, the home made scones. I had to go there for one of these, I'm not sure whether it was a penny or tuppenny bag of this, and it was made in one of these conical, you know shaped bags, and all folded over and I used to go... that was another place I used to have to go for my Grandmother for her baking and cooking.

K: Do you remember any of the Home Guard?

VS: Yes, I remember the Home Guard. There was a Home Guard Station in Back Market Street. There was also an ARP Station, with it, there, where they used to sound the sirens when the bombers were on the way, when the planes were coming over, the Germans. And they used to have this big siren thing that they used to set off, which was situated in a little warehouse thing at the back of there, I don't know what it was used for. The Home Guard used to be in the fields across the other side of Mills' Farm, the other side of Greenside Farm. There were some Home Guard stationed there, under canvas for quite a while, yeah.

K: Did you see them doing their manoeuvres, or..?

VS: Well, you used to see them, you know, doing different things and marching up and down at night. There's a story... I'm just trying to think of it, of someone was walking through the fields there, and this man that was on guard didn't know these people, and he was supposed to have stopped them and had the bayonet on the end of the rifle, 'Friend or foe!' you know, whatever it was.

K: So how many people did Fletcher's employ then?

VS: Oh, I don't know. A hell of a lot of people were employed at Fletchers, because, of course, it worked round the clock. The six to two, ten and ten six shift.

K: Right, do you remember VE Day when War finished?

VS: Yes, and we had the street parties. We had the big party on the front lawn by all the weeping willow trees at Vale House. All these tables were set out and people had brought stuff, you know, from... all their home made cooking and everything and we had a rare old time.

K: Was that the works, the people from the works?

VS: Well yes, there were people from the works, and the people locally, that lived locally that didn't even work there. Obviously, it was a great occasion, that's right and there were plenty of room and everything and yeah, it was a marvellous time. I remember it very well. All the flags and all the banners were out, you know, between the trees and things. I don't know whether anyone ever has any photographs or anything, because you didn't think about things like that in those days? About taking photographs for... I think people now are more educated perhaps, and more aware of if they take photographs or they do something and they keep it, I think there will be a lot of things in perhaps in another fifty, sixty years that have been remembered of where we didn't do a lot of the things in those days, because we weren't either educated enough or weren't smart enough to think that we would ever need to be remembered...

K: Well you didn't have a camera, perhaps?

VS: That's right. And VJ time, the VJ time, I remember we were back at my Mother's house at 189 Springfield Road, Kearsley, which was the street parties then were all round the backs of those streets. Kingsway and all of those streets, all round the back there, they had all these street parties. I remember our Pauline and our Dawn being dressed up and all of us going, you know, it was... wonderful memories of great times and they seemed to go on forever, did those parties.

K: Was Christmas any different at Wartime?

VS: Well, we didn't have, there wasn't all the things that we have now, but of course, we did have a great time and there wasn't the commercialisation in Christmas as what there is now. But I do remember I wanted a steam engine, and I remember getting a little brass steam engine where you used to fill this little tank with methylated spirits and it used to run to the wick, and you used to push it under the boiler and you used to get the water boiling, and of course, which used to drive this little steam engine, it was only a small thing. And I remember we used to have an old radio a cat's whisker radio. I don't know why they were called cat's whisker radio at that time, but we had this thing and we used to have to try and tune it in this whisker in, to be able to get it... And then, of course, we got a little more modern radio. But at Vale House, we used to get our electricity from the power station, so we had to have transformers to be able to cut the power down, because it was too great for the normal thing that was being done. I remember getting a small radio, but, we were lucky again, in many ways, because we could go into the ballroom, at Vale House, where they had this big radiogram, and everything, you see, where we could blast out records with these big speakers like, you know... We were so fortunate. I speak to an old pal of mine every now and again, a lad called Fred Shawcross. Fred Shawcross the drummer. He used to work for Bolton Evening News.

K: He still writes, doesn't he?

VS: He does, he does. He used to work for the Daily Mail, he was Captain Heath's assistant, picking the horses and he used to write it under his own name and he was only allowed to pick horses, I think it was two days a week, and he used to write under the name of Uno, it was his name that he was known as in the Daily Mail. He then worked for the Sporting Life and he does a column in the Bolton Evening News now. But he was a drummer. His family, all his family were entertainers, and he came to Vale House as a boy drummer and I was absolutely, very, very impressed with this young kid 'as could play these drums like Fred could. It was rather something special when you had entertainers, and live entertainment and everything. It was, yes, it was... (laughs) they used to come from all over the place.

K: Did you listen to the radio during the War? To the, you know, Lord Haw Haw?

VS: Yes, I remember Lord Haw Haw with his propaganda that he used to be bringing on, of what was going to happen, and all these other things that would happen to you all. And, you know, they would have everything, they would march through Europe and the world and it would belong to them. Yes, you'd get Mussolini and Gbels, and all these people there doing short speeches that you would hear them come on all these programmes, yeah.

K: Did you do anything special for the War effort? Like recycling, or War savings or..?

VS: I used to have to get, up at my Grandma's, it was like, with the directors and everything being at the mill, all the cloths and everything had to be done, and my Grandma never used a cloth twice. They had to be ironed to perfection and everything and they had a big wash house at the bottom of the backyard in Vale House. And I used to have to get up early to get the fire started, under the boilers, to get the water and everything boiling, and then there was this absolutely giant, massive mangle. Now I used to wind this handle. And when I'd done all this I used to go round with the Savings Stamps, Wartime Saving Stamps. And for doing all of these things, I used to get sixpence a week, which was a lot of spending money in those days, and I used to go round with all these Stamps, you know, round Stoneclough and Ringley and everything. Go round to all different houses with them, for and on behalf of my Grandmother. Then my Grandmother, I think she used to pay that into the Post Office if I remember correctly, when I used to come back you know, and hand her what I'd taken, and all these different stamps that I had sold, and she'd get the balance. And then, well she'd would have to pay it in the Post Office, because, I'm sure she got the stamps back from the Post Office to be able to sell for the Wartime effort. With regard to other things, there was... I can't recall there being any recycling, not the same as they recycle today. There was the collection of steel and iron, and they took all the railings away from places for the Wartime effort. Where they took them from parks, and public buildings and many other things. But I can't remember a collection of tin cans, there wasn't as many...

K: No... books, books were collected.

VS: That's right, there was a paper collection. There may have been a paper collection, but I'm sorry I can't recall exactly what happened to that.

K: And was the War Savings to do with Warship Week? Or was it just a permanent thing, it wouldn't just be one week?

VS: I think it was a permanent thing, yes. I think it carried on and just grew and grew.

K: So people loaning their savings really, to... By doing that, loaning them to the Government.

VS: Yes, I think I still have some of the original saving certificates upstairs.

ENDS