

Chapter 2 Working life in the 30's

By this time my brother Charles was married and had started a poultry farm in addition to working full time elsewhere. I was at an age to leave school but up until now I had not had a bicycle of my own, however I had learned to ride on Johnie Brown's bike. Johnie had a lady's bike and I used to go to school on it, he would sit on the saddle and steer the bike, I would be between him and the handlebars doing all the pedalling.

Naturally as I was leaving school I needed to have a bike of my own to enable me to get to work. I was given an old bike which I put in working order, I must admit that the chain came off quite often and the tyres were thin and punctured easily, but at least I now had "wheels."

The first job I had was on the farm where my brother Fred was living and working, my job was cob catching and driving away. A cob is the name for the basket which was used in potato picking, a potato picking gang consisted of a ganger in charge of up to a dozen pickers, these were usually made up of women and a few boys. There was also a horseman with a spinner, this was a machine with a series of tynes attached to a wheel which revolved as the machine was pulled along by the horses and threw the potatoes up out of the ground.

The ganger would count the number of strides from one end of the field to the other and then divide it by the number of pickers and mark out sections with sticks. Each picker would have to pick the potatoes over this area, and all the empty cobs would be there waiting to be filled.

As cob catcher I would stand on the shafts behind the horse but in front of the tumbril, a man walking behind the tumbril would throw up the full cobs which would hold about 20lbs of potatoes, I would catch the cobs, empty them into the tumbril and then throw the empty cobs down. When the tumbril was full I would have to drive it off to the place where they were making the "Reek" where the potatoes were to be stored. The men there would pile the potatoes into the shape of a triangle, once the triangle was taking shape the outside would be covered with straw then on top of the straw earth would be placed, but only to within about 12" of the top so that the potatoes could breathe through the open space.

Although I was only 14 years old I had to cycle 4 miles to work and then 4 miles home again in the evening, this was not on a proper road but mostly on an earth path about 12 inches wide and when it was wet (which was often) it was very slippery and would clog up the wheels of the bike with the mud and leaves.

The potato gang would work from 7.30am to 3.30pm but I had to get there by 7am so that I was waiting in the field by the time they arrived. My first job was to catch the horse who was loose in the horseyard, take him to the stable and put on his harness which consisted of a collar and a saddle. To put a collar on a carthorse you have to turn the collar upside down so that it will go over his ears and then when it is on turn it the right way round (easier said than done!) When I was 14 I was very small and the only way that I could put the collar on the horse was; first to put the collar into the manger, climb up into the manger and put the collar over the horse's head, on numerous occasions just as I had it half on he would lift his head and throw me out of the manger, it's a wonder that I wasn't killed. When the potato pickers had gone

home I had to take the horse back to the stable and take off his harness, my work day which had started at 7.am didn't finish untill 5.pm.

In the winter I went to work in the dark and came home in the dark 5 days a week on the saturday I finished at 2pm. This was all for the princely sum of 14/6 a week in todays money 72½p.

When the potato season finished the farmer came to me and said "well boy there's not much work about but you can stay on for 12/6 a week" (62½p) I had no choice but to stay, this was in 1932, of course I had to give my earnings to my father and he gave me 3/- (15p) pocket money.

Winter on the farm was pretty rough and I had lots of odd jobs to do there, as well as arable farming pigs were kept on the farm and during the cold weather a big boiler, which was situated in one of the sheds, would be filled with potatoes that were not good enough for the market. My job was to build a fire underneath and leave the potatoes to steam all night, consequently when I arrived in the morning they would be nicely cooked. The first thing I did on arrival would be to find two or three good potatoes, take off the skin and eat them, they were delicious. I would then have to mash the other potatoes, mix them with the meal, and feed the pigs.

Another job I had to do was to cut hay from the stack with a big hay knife, this hay was for the horsekeeper to feed to the horses. On the farm they also grew sugar beet, celery and mangolds, the mangolds were also used to feed to the horses and the cows, but before they were fed to the animals they had to be cleaned and put through a grinder which shredded them a bit like chipped potatoes. To clean them you had a strip of metal bent into a hooped shape and sharpened on one edge, with this you scraped off the dirt and the small fibrous roots.

Most of the celery was sent to London and in the early days this had to be taken to the nearest station (Shippea Hill), in later years it was collected by lorries.

The horsekeepers were very proud of their horses and when they were working on the roads carting to the station etc, they would all be well turned out. The horses coats would be brushed and shining and they were decorated with beautifully polished horsebrasses. The Horsekeepers from all the adjoining farms would compete to see who's horses looked best.

As spring came and the grass began to grow I would have to take the coves to graze along the side of the main road, I would have to spend the whole day there alone, apart from the coves. Fortunately there was not much traffic in those days even though it was the main road through the fens, grazing on the side of the road today would be completely impossible.

With spring also came the preparation for seeding, I was not old enough to use the plough but I was old enough to do harrowing. The harrows consisted of three pieces, each with long sharp metal spikes which were attached to the horse collars by chains, these were called the traces. The harrows were pretty heavy and it was as much as I could do to turn them over, as you went along the harrows collected weeds etc and if they weren't cleared they clogged up. To clear them you had a round bar of metal hooked at the bottom end and a loop at the top for your hand, when you wanted to clear the harrow you hooked it with the bottom of this tool and pulled. With the horse pulling one way and you the other the harrow lifted and the rubbish fell off. Then when you got to the end of the field, more problems! you had to turn round, to do this you had to hold

the harrow on the inside of the turn with the hook, and let the other two go round, this sounds simple but being a boy I was not given the best of the horses, in fact I was probably given the worst. Usually the horse I had for this job was a white one called Gipsy, she was very old and had sore legs, if the traces touched her legs, which was quite often when we were turning at the end of the field, she would jump over the traces. When she did this the harrows would overturn and finish up with the spikes in the air, I now had to turn them back again which meant unhooking the horse and manually turning them over. If they had hit me when they turned over they would have killed me.

One day I was harrowing and it was very hot and sunny, I was wearing wellington boots and my feet were killing me. In the fens all the fields are surrounded by dykes which most of the year had water in them, to cool my feet I hopped into the cold water. I had done this two or three times during the morning when the farmer turned up on his bike and said "if I see you stop on the end and get into the dyke again you will be sacked." He had been watching me with binoculars from the farmhouse.

After the preparation came the drilling, when the sugar beet came up I had the same horse, Gipsy, for the horse hoe. This consisted of a series of hoes attached to a frame, I would lead the horse down the centre of the row and a man at the rear would hold two long handles and steer the hoes on either side of the sugar beet. After this the men would come with the hand hoes and separate the rows of beet, then along came the women and boys and separate the clusters of plants into singles, this was called chopping out and singleing and for this they were paid piece work at a rate of so much per acre.

As far as I can remember I continued to work on this farm until the following autumn when I went to work on the neighbouring farm potato picking, this meant quite an increase in wages as it was only a seasonal job. The potato lifting was contracted out to a man named Bernard Gathercole and Barry Hensby and I were working for him, in fact we were his best pickers. As a consequence of this we found that our reach was longer than the other pickers, a bit unfair but we were not in a position to do much about it as there were so few jobs about that paid the sort of wages we were getting.

It was hard work and I remember it was quite a relief to get a wet day when we couldn't work, I remember that sometimes even though it only looked as if it was a shower, we (Barry and I) would go home and as a result everyone had to go home. Bern Gathercole would say "you bleeders, you go home if it smells like rain."

After potato picking came sugar beet lifting, at this time all the work was done by hand. The sugar beet grew large in the fens with big roots in the soft soil and tops 2ft. high, we called this job 'pulling and topping beet.' To do this you had eight rows of sugar beet which you pulled 2 rows at a time and laid them flat in one row. This meant that you would lay four rows to the left and four rows to the right and end up with a space the width of four rows in the middle. You then took a beet hook (a blade with a wooden handle,) chopped off the tops and threw the beet into heaps in the middle.

Barry and I would see how far we could go chopping off the tops without looking up, sometimes we would finish up so dizzy that we couldn't stand upright and had to kneel down until our heads stopped spinning.

As you can imagine there were a few people around the village with the tops of their fingers missing, I cut my fingers on many occasions but not seriously.

At the end of the season there was no more work and in those days no such thing as unemployment pay, if you couldn't work you had no money, I remember that this winter was awful. When you had no money whatsoever there was a system called parish relief, this meant that you had to go in front of a man called Pearmain, who was also the local registrar, if he considered that you were destitute he could give you a ticket for groceries redeemable at the local shop. However you didn't get this for nothing, I remember that I was given a ticket to the value of 4/- (20p) for this I had to go onto the warren where there were stone piles and I had to sieve stone and sand by hand for two days each week. After I had done my two days the foreman, Mo Heffer, would give me my ticket, written right across the ticket was, 'No cigarettes', I quite agreed with this but then I have never smoked!!

Barry and I would go looking for work, sometimes cycling for 20 or 30 miles a day but nothing was forthcoming until the early spring and the potato setting. This was all done by hand and usually at this time of year there was a cold east wind blowing. With nothing in the fens to break the wind there would be lots of dust blowing around, I remember that it was sometimes so cold that we would wrap a sack around us to keep warm. There was nothing that you could do about your hands as you needed them free to plant the potatoes as quickly as possible as it was all paid on piece work.

After the potato setting I got a job working for Chivers the jam makers, they had several farms and grew a bit of everything, cabbage, cauliflower, sprouts, potatoes, sugar beet, chicory, mangolds, mint, strawberries, raspberries, gooseberries, red currants, black currants, plums, apples, pears,...

Many people worked for, and lived in the houses belonging to Chivers, they had their own shop and it was quite a little community. Chivers also had their own railway and rolling stock which linked up with the main railway line to London at Shippea Hill.

Casual labour was employed by two foremen who were brothers, George and Fred Bailey, these men selected their own gangs. I was employed by George who was particularly strict. My first job was plant setting, this was now done mechanically, the plant setting machine had 6 seats 3 each side facing one another with plant trays at either end. You placed the plants into cups that revolved on a metal belt, this then took them below and planted them, I thought how easy it was just sitting there and riding around each day.

Came the strawberry picking season which I loved, I stuffed myself with the best fruit all day long. Goosebreey picking I hated because of all the prickles on the branches, they ripped your hands to pieces.

I mentioned that George was very strict, to prove this I remember that if you asked to go to the toilet more than once in a morning you had to bring back a sample on the end of a stick to prove that you really did go!!! My spell with George ended one day when I was partaking of some prank with the other boys and girls but was considered to be the ring leader, I was sacked, disaster for me as I had to tell my dad when he came home from work. That evening I went to the home of Fred Bailey (Georges brother) and asked him if he would take me into his gang, he was a much more pleasant man and told me to report to him next morning, this I did and spent the rest of the season with him.

I met George's son in Mildenhall market in April 1994 and said to him "your father sacked me when I worked for Chivers but your Uncle took me on the same day."

When we had to cut the mint we had to be there by 5 or 6 O'clock whilst the dew was still on the mint, the smell was great. You had to fill the baskets so that the mint was piled high above the top then along came the foreman and pushed it all down and you had to start again. I thoroughly enjoyed my work at this time and strangely enough I always remember it as being fine and pleasant weather, we must have had some bad weather but I don't remember it.

I continued working there untill the end of the summer when I was offered a job working for a car breaker cum repairer, the wages were only £1 a week but it was what I wanted to do. I was crazy about cars and as I said I had been able to drive since I was 12 years old and now I had the opportunity to do this even without a licence.

The owner came from a family of gypsies called Brinkley who had settled at Hollywell Row, a village about 4 miles from Lakenheath. They were a large family the father was a horse dealer and the mother went around the area selling second hand clothes, my boss had one brother the same age as me and we became very friendly.

My place of work consisted of a galvanised iron shed, room enough to hold about 3 cars, other than this every thing had to be done outside. On the piece of land there was a double decker bus in which lived my bosses uncle, his name was Job and he looked just like Mr Pickwick complete with sideburns and sleeved waistcoat, he had a heart of gold and was very kind to me, letting me eat my lunch in the warmth of his bus in the winter.

In another corner of the land there was a typical Gypsy caravan and in this there lived a man who I had remembered seeing many times in Lakenheath, sitting in front of a barrel organ which was drawn by a horse. He would turn the handle for playing the organ and people would give him coins, he was a frightening looking man with swathy Italian type features. He had no use in his legs and his arms were long like a monkeys. After I had been working there for a few days he sent a message for me to go and see him, I was a little apprehensive but need not have been as he turned out to be very nice and was very well educated. He asked me lots of questions about myself and where I lived in Lakenheath, when I told him he said "I knew your Mother, she was always very kind and gave me a cup of tea whenever I passed your house."

I soon settled down and in no time was trusted with lots of little repair jobs, often when I broke up a car I would take it apart carefully so that I soon learned everything about the internal combustion engine.

My boss always had nice cars such as Buick, Oldsmobile, S.S.1, Chrysler etc. In addition to breaking cars we were also scrap metal dealers, this meant that on occasions we had to go out and work elsewhere. I remember that one job we did was to dismantle the stables at Elvedon Hall, this was the home of Lord Iveagh of the Guinness family, I couldn't believe what I saw, the horses lived in stables which were much better than the house that I lived in! Each stall was partitioned by elaborate cast ironwork, each stable had a drinking bowl with running water and the walls were all tiled. There were various coaches, open and enclosed all superbly upholstered, today they would be worth a fortune but they were all eventually broken up as there were no horses left at the hall by this time.

Whilst we were working there the chief engineer of the estate came to us and said that he had a tractor that he had made many years ago, the earl had told him that he had to get rid of it and he asked if my boss would buy it. I went

with my boss to look at it and when we got there we found a large monstrosity all made by hand and weighing a few tons, it was a wonder that it had ever been able to move. My boss bought it and said that we would tow it away the next day. On the morrow we turned up with the oxy acetelyn cutter and proceeded to cut it up, the old engineer came to see us and when he realised what we were doing he cried, he thought that we would take it away to a museum, really we should have done as it was quite unique.

On the same estate we were commissioned to remove the sails and all the workings from a windmill, we removed everything except the shaft which held the sails. This was an enormous casting and weighed a few tons, we decided that the only way to get it down and away was to erect a block and tackle from the top of the windmill and lower it down onto the lorry. We fixed up the tackle and took the sides off the lorry and backed it up underneath, all went well untill the last 3 or 4 feet when the tackle broke and this large shaft fell onto the back of the lorry. When it came to rest the back of the lorry was touching the ground and the front was up in the air, we then rigged up some sheer legs and a fresh block and tackle and eventually moved it along the lorry untill the front wheels touched the ground. The wheels only just touched the ground and we drove about 12 miles on the main roads like this travelling at about 10 miles an hour, who needs power steering? it was as light as a feather!

Another operation that I remember was the removal of a beam pumping engine from a pumping station in the fens, there were several of these engines about as they were used to control the water levels. When I think about it I wonder how we managed as there was only my boss and myself with only the basic tools. The cars I dismantled would be worth a fortune nowadays, to name a few, Rolls Royce, Minerva, Bean, Clyndo, Morris Cowleys and Oxfords, Fiat, Austins, Essex Packard, Swift, Alvis, Sunbeam, Standard.

Perhaps you don't realise but at this time a lot of wood was used in the construction of cars and this had to be disposed of, consequently we always had a fire going outside to burn it. In the winter it would be the first job in the morning to light the fire, I usually did this and used the petrol out of the old cars along with some wood and paper. On one morning I put out the paper and wood and proceeded to put on the petrol, unbeknown to me the fire was still alight from the previous day, Bang!! the petrol exploded singing my eyebrows, the can went 20 feet into the air and when it came down it was round instead of square, people in the neighbouring houses came out to see what had caused the explosion, to this day I cannot understand how I was not seriously burned. We used to get all types of callers, eccentrics and otherwise, there was one man in particular a Mr Pepper, he was like a professor and as a hobby he ran a windmill on the adjoining property, he was also a vet come herbalist.

For some time my father had suffered from a rash on his face, it consisted of a series of spots with white heads and must have been extremely painful. They called it 'barbers rash' and he had been to the doctor and to specialists and no one had been able to do anything about it, he had not been able to shave for several years. One day while I was talking to Mr Pepper I told him about my fathers rash, he said he would cure it, I asked if he wanted to see my father but he said no. He brought me a bottle of mixture which smelt like carbolic, he told me to sterilise a needle and prick out the spots to get the puss out, this would be very painful, then I had to dab all the spots with the mixture, which would also be painful. I told my father and he said he didn't mind the pain if

it would cure it, each night I carried out the instructions and after about a month the spots gradually dissappeared. After about two months he was able to have the hair on his face cut short with clippers and shortly after that he was able to shave again for the first time in years and was able to shave untill his untimely death, for this Mr Pepper would ~~except nothing~~

Around this time whilst at work I felt a sharp pain in my stomach, it gradually got worse and I had to go home. In the evening I went to the doctor and he said that I just had colic, the pain persisted and in the morning I could only get to the doctors by standing with one foot on my bicycle pedal and pushing myself along with my other foot, I couldn't even get on to the bike to ride it. Again the doctor sent me home, in the middle of the night my father had to send for the doctor who now said I must be taken to hospital immediately. This meant a 30 mile ride in the back seat of a taxi to Addenbrookes hospital in Cambridge, needless to say by the time I got there I had peritonitis, was operated on immediately and hovered on the brink of death for several days.

The first I remember was when I came round with screens all around my bed and a terrific pain in my side, I remember asking the nurse what the awfull smell was, she didn't say anything and after a time I realised that it was from my bed and was from the puss which was coming from a tube that dissappeared into my body. I can't remember exactly but I know that I was in hospital for many weeks and it was many months before I was able to resume work, the welfare people at the hospital were quite concerned about the care that I would get when I was discharged and the mother of the boy in the next bed to me offered to look after me for a week or two. I know that I was grateful at the time but you know what teenagers are, I didn't keep in touch with the family as they lived some 30 miles from my home.

Eventually I went back to work but it wasn't the same as my bosses cousin had filled in for me while I was ill and was obviously there to stay. I found that he was selling parts for cars and keeping the money, I told my boss this and he said to me "don't you do this?" I said "certainly not!" I think that I was too honest but that was the way I was brought up, fortunately. I stayed on for some time but under the circumstances I felt that I should be receiving more wages because whenever I sold any parts the money was always handed over, however no raise was forthcoming and I eventually left. Before departing from this phase of my life I should say that my boss could neither read nor write which meant that I had to read all his letters to him and that I had to write any letters he needed to send. I also had to write out any cheques that he needed to send out, I taught him to sign his name so that he could sign the cheques. I remember that one day he said that he was going to have his name painted on the door of the lorry, this he did and when I looked at it it said 'S.I.BRINKEY LTD' now although I was too young to know much about business I realised that he was not a limited company and told him so, he said that it 'looked good.' I spoke to Mr Pepper about it and he explained to me what constituted a limited company and he told my boss that he must take it off of the lorry which he did.

After leaving here I went back to work on the land, I can't remember which farm it was and I didn't remember what time of year it was. I have previously mentioned the Suttons who lived next door, Tom Sutton who was the same age as me had always kept tame rabbits in which we had a mutual interest, by this time he was old enough to have a dog of his own and the dog he had was a

greyhound. Now the obvious reason for having this type of dog was so that we could go poaching and to go poaching for rabbits you need a dog, two lights, and two people. The lights need to be very bright and focused on a small area, to do this the light had to have a large reflector, in these days the largest torch would take only 3 1½ volt batteries this was not bright enough so what we did was to join two torches together so that it would take 6 batteries and a stronger bulb. Tom and I had grown up together so we made an ideal team two torches and a dog and we were ready for action.

I mentioned previously that my Uncle Adam used to take me up the warren and that it was the home of probably millions of rabbits who could easily burrow as it was sandy soil. Incidentally Lakenheath Aerodrome now covers the warren and is I think the largest USAF airbase in Europe so you can tell how large it is. The warren was owned by the Earl of Iveagh and although these rabbits were pests it was illegal for us to take them and he had gamekeepers to see that we didn't! However as I said it was a vast area and as we only went out on moonless nights, and then after midnight, the gamekeepers were not all that keen to be about.

I would like to point out that my father was strictly against this activity and I was the only member of our family who did it much to the annoyance of my elder brothers. To catch the rabbits you had to get them in the beam of the torch on the open ground, you walked a short distance apart to give you a wider range with the lights, Once the rabbit was in the light you loosed the dog and with a bit of luck he would catch the rabbit and bring it back to you.

Obviously you needed somewhere to put the rabbits when you had caught them and a sack was no use as you needed both hands free, what we did was to cut a slit in the linings of our jackets and put the rabbits in there. The most rabbits we caught in one night was about twenty and having ten rabbits in the lining of your jacket right round to the middle of your back was quite heavy I can assure you. Should the gamekeeper or a policeman have spotted us and chased us we would never have got away as the weight of the rabbits would have slowed us down, in fact we were quite tired out by the time we got home as we would have walked several miles.

Although I was a poacher I could not kill the rabbits and Tom had to do this, he was an expert at it and could kill them with one blow to the back of the neck. When we got the rabbits home we had to 'hulk' them (take out the intestines) and 'huddle' them (join the back legs together so that you could hang them on a pole.) Although my father didn't agree with my activities he still did this job for me when he got up in the morning, sometimes we had to keep the rabbits hanging in the shed for a couple of days as the man who brought them from us only came to the village twice a week.

We were never caught although I'm sure that P.C. Briggs the village policeman had a rough idea of what we were doing.

Another poacher who I sometimes went out with was Art Brown, he was older than me and a much better poacher than either Tom or I but he seemed to like my company and I spent a lot of time with him. Art had two dogs and always had guns and was an excellent shot, the only guns I ever had were air guns and not very good ones, he worked for a local farmer whose land adjoined the warren. There were always a lot of rabbits and hares on this land as it was so close to the warren and Art had permission to catch them so we were able to do this in the daytime. We spent many hours together with the two dogs catching hares.

Art had wavy hair of which I was very envious and he always combed it straight back and kept it down with what I thought was Brillantine. However, one day we were out with the dogs and it started to rain I looked at Art and his head was a mass of soap suds, the soap was in his ears, his eyes, everywhere, we laughed about it for years, obviously soap was cheaper than Brillantine!

Art also had a motorbike, I never remember him getting a licence to drive but we used to take it onto the warren (which was not illegal) and ride it all over the place. Art also had ferrets which he would keep in his pocket and also let them run around in his shirt, I must admit that he was my idol and I would have gone anywhere with him, perhaps he found me a nuisance at times, I don't know he didn't say. On Sunday mornings we would go ratting, sometimes with the ferrets and sometimes using the motor bike, mostly we would go ratting in my brothers chicken pens. The rats would live under the huts and we would look around for their bolt holes, when we found them we would close up all but 2 or 3 then put in the ferret, I have seen Art stand over a bolt hole and catch the rats with his bare hands. When we went with the motor bike we would mix oil with the petrol so that lots of smoke came out of the exhaust, we would then attach a tube to the exhaust and put it into one of the rat holes, the rats would either come out or were gassed they didn't have much choice, however we were never able to get rid of them completely.

Times were still very hard there was not much work about and one spring Art got me a job with his employer, the job was bird scaring! I had to walk around all day shouting and swinging a rattle in my hand to keep the birds (mostly Rooks) from eating the wheat or whatever had been planted in the field. I would never have believed it but in five minutes a rook would be able to eat about 30 yards of seed, this job was really boring!

In the winter another source of pocket money was catching moles, none of the farmers objected to you catching them as they were quite a problem. I was lucky enough to have a few mole traps which I would set on land which adjoined the river Lode. Some of the best mole runs were the ones which ran into the side of a dyke these runs were sometimes used by a number of moles and if you found one you were lucky. Before setting your trap you usually trod in the run and visited it once or twice a day to see how often the moles used it, I had lots of time on my hands if I was unemployed so this was no problem. You got more money if you could skin the mole, nail the skin out on a board and dry it. The skin had to be square and there was a special way of skinning the mole to obtain this, I learned how to do it but I didn't enjoy it as I didn't like the smell of the moles flesh, as a result I mostly sold the moles intact which only got me half price.

I sold the skins to a man named Jonah Mackander who was a skin buyer and bought any type of skin, rabbit, stoat, mole etc, these he took to the fur factory in Brandon. The fur factory in Brandon, apart from farming was the major industry and employed all the girls in the area, the fur was plucked from the dried rabbit pelts and as I understand it was mainly used in hat making, the skin, as such was used for gelatine, the smell from the factory was quite unpleasant. For some men in the village their full time job was cycling around the outlying areas and buying skins, I think my brother Charles did this for a short period.

By now two new cinema's had been built one in Brandon and one in Mildenhall, it was about 5 miles to each one from Lakenheath so it depended on what film was

showing as to which place we went to on a Saturday night. Brandon was the most popular as there were more girls there, there were two performances on Saturday evening and we would always go to the second one as it gave us a chance to chat up the girls and walk up and down the avenue. The avenue was an avenue of trees that stretched for about 600 yards along the front of the cinema with a tarmac path in between, this was dimly lit which gave us the opportunity to have fun with the girls! Things were very different in those days you were lucky if you got a kiss.

When you were in the cinema it was O.K. if it didn't get too hot for if it was hot the girls who worked in the fur factory would give off an odour which their bodies had absorbed from the rabbit skins. I'm afraid that personal hygiene was not as easy in those days as not many houses had running water.

The cost of the evening would probably total 1/- to 1/6 (5 to 7½ p) we would usually meet the girls inside the cinema so that we didn't have to pay their entrance fee. There were usually several of us who cycled to Brandon together so the journey there and back was always quite pleasant and there were no cars to worry about. While we were in the cinema we would leave our bikes, complete with lights, on a piece of rough ground opposite, petty crime in those days was almost non-existent and I don't ever remember a bike or even a light being stolen. I had by this time a new bike which I bought on H.P. at 5/- (25p) down and 2/6 (12½p) a week, total cost was £2.19.6d (£2.97½p) for another £1 I could have had three speed gears and chain case, this bike lasted me until I went into the R.A.F. when my brother Charles sold it for me for more than I had paid for it!

We had to have a light on the front of the bike and a reflector on the rear, P.C. Briggs was pretty strict on this and you never knew where he was. I remember that I was very young when P.C. Briggs first came to the village, I can just remember his predecessor P.C. Adams, things had been easygoing under him and when P.C. Briggs took over he decided to change all that. In the winter it would be dark when the men went to work and also when they came home, there would be no traffic about and a lot of the men couldn't afford lights. P.C. Briggs would wait at High bridge, this was the bridge over the river Lode and the main way into the fens, he would stop the men without lights and make them walk back to the village pushing their bikes. It was at that time also a recognised thing that if they were harvesting potatoes the men were allowed to fill the bags that they had taken their food in with potatoes to take home. P.C. Briggs decided to put a stop to this and one night he made all the men empty out their bags at the side of the road, apparently there was about 1 ton of potatoes when he had finished. This was the last straw and in the evening the men got together and decided to do something about it, as I mentioned before there was a pond in the middle of the village, the men all congregated around the pond and when P.C. Briggs came along they decided that he would have to go into the pond. Some upright citizen saw what was happening and went off to get Dr. Pickworth who was a justice of the peace, he read the riot act to the men who then saw common sense and refrained from throwing P.C. Briggs into the pond. However it served its purpose and from then on P.C. Briggs was not quite so strict and in fact after a time the local people liked him, he turned out to be very fair and there was no crime in the village (a bit different from today!) Any boys who misbehaved were clouted around the ears with his gloves, if he couldn't get near enough he used his cane this was enough to keep us in check.

In later years my brother Ambrose became good friends with him and they made several trips to the seaside together, his son Jack Briggs and I have remained friends to this day, he joined the police force and retired as a Chief Inspector, he now lives in Mildenhall.

In these days there was not much for the lads to do in their spare time, Sammy Mason had a grocery shop to which was attached a small room, in this he installed a 3/4 size billiard table and charged 6d (2½p) for ¼ hours play. If we had some money we would congregate there as it was somewhere warm to go on a cold night. Living down Station road was a small farmer (the farm was small not the man) named Buckberry, he was a big man and once or twice a week would ride his bike to the village to play billiards. He would have his trousers rolled up as he didn't have any bicycle clips and summer or winter he never wore socks, No one else was allowed on the table on these evenings as Sammy and Buckberry played for money, I can see Sammy now, he was very bad on his feet which were big and always splayed out, he constantly had a fag in the corner of his mouth. He was pretty mean and gave nothing away however I did have a bit of luck from him, he had a bull nosed Morris Cowley two seater car and when I was breaking cars my boss brought it from him, it fell to me to break it up and when I took out the seat I found about 5/- (25p) in sixpences. These had obviously fallen out of his trouser pocket and he didn't look under the seat when he sold the car. A little farther down the road from Sammy's shop was a sweet shop on the corner of Undley road kept by a Mrs Richards, us lads would congregate there on a Sunday afternoon and each put in a penny to buy a packet of 10 players cigarettes. In those days there were numbered cards in each packet and we would each chose a number and the one who was nearest to the number of the card in the packet would have the cigarettes. I didn't smoke but I joined in and if I won I would sell the cigarettes cheap to someone who smoked.

Also on a Sunday we would go onto the warren and play pontoon, this of course was quite illegal and we had to have a lookout for the policeman. Jack Briggs mother knew that we played and she would give Jack some money to come and play and if she knew she would tell him where his father would be. In addition to the lads there would be older men who played cards there, they would be able to gamble for higher stakes, where we used ½d or 1d they would gamble 3d or 4d consequently if I managed to get a pontoon up which entitled me to have the bank I could not afford to run it and would sell it for anything up to 1/- (5p) to one of the older men.

As well as Charles being married my sister Rita (Margheurita after my mother) and my sister Bertha had also married. Bertha's husband was in the Horse Guards they had a son and as there was no service accommodation available she came home to look after us. By us I mean myself my father and my brother Ambrose, I cannot say that I was particularly happy with the thought of having a young baby in the house but then it was not for me to decide and I suppose that we were lucky to have someone to keep house for us.

At this time Barry Hensby and I were not as close friends as we had been as he had now moved to a new job, the Air Ministry had started to construct Feltwell Aerodrome and Barry had managed to get a job there, I tried this but was unsuccessful, he was earning more money as the wages were more than for agricultural workers got, and consequently was friendly with the people he was working with.

I renewed my friendship with Sid Brinkley the brother of my old boss, he by this time had obtained his driving licence and was able to borrow his mothers car, a Ford V8 and later a Packard, we travelled around whenever we could afford the petrol.

Suddenly disaster struck my Father was knocked off his bike and killed I was quite devastated. This left my brother and I with our sister looking after us, where before my father had run the household it now fell to us and with the money that we had available we found that we couldn't make ends meet. As it happened my Brother-in-law had served his time in the Horse Guards and was due for release, he had managed to find a house to rent in a village called Flitwick in Bedfordshire, he had relatives living there. This meant the break up of my home and I had to find somewhere else to live, fortunately for me the daughter of baker Hammond who was married to the son of my fathers step-sister offered me accomodation and I moved in. Ambrose was offered a home with two elderly ladies who looked after him like a son, he stayed with them untill they died. Although I was given a good home I wasn't settled and made enquiries about joining the Airforce but was told that there was no hope, so I settled down as far as possible.

My brother Charles now decided that he would buy a car although he had a licence to drive he could not do so, I could drive and had no licence but now I was old enough to apply for one. The situation was; I had a provisional licence, L plates on the car, and I was teaching my brother to drive. I took my test as soon as possible and passed, Charles was most generous and allowed me to borrow the car whenever I wanted to, this changed my life. In the meantime we had received compensation for the death of my father and when this was shared between the seven of us we received about £20 each, it was the most money I had ever had and in no time I had brought myself a motorbike for £12, this meant that I now had two sets of wheels available to me.

By now Feltwell Aerodrome was completed and Barry came back to agricultural work so we were close friends again. Where previously we had to cycle to Mildenhall, Brandon and Bury St. Edmonds we now had a car and a motor cycle and our travels were extended to Cambridge and Ely. Our circle of friends was also extended to include Jeff Halls who had a car, Tom Flack who also had a car and Dick Clements. Barry and I were working on Lord Iveagh's estate and were earning a bit more money so in the summer we could afford to go to Great Yarmouth for the weekend, Jeff and Tom in their cars and me on my motor bike we would sleep in the cars. Naturally girls were now coming into the picture and although I have not previously mentioned it there was one small romance earlier in my life with a young lady from the village who was at the time working for my brother Charles and his wife looking after their daughter Hazel. Everyone else was in favour of this match but I could see myself getting tied down so I broke it off rather abruptly with no explanation whatsoever, I have always felt a little bit guilty about this.

Prior to his marriage my brother Charles used to do quite a bit of running he was primarily a mile runner but also ran in ½ mile races. He encouraged me and soon I was running in small events and doing reasonably well the only drawback was that I had to do most of my training alone. I did my training on the warren, there was a place at the top of Broom Road where a wire netting fence ran straight for about ½ a mile, I could time myself as I ran from one end to the other and back and call it a mile. My piece-de-resistance came in the one

reasonable sized event at which I ran, it was at Littleport which is between Lackenheath and Ely. Each year they held a flower show and sports event and it attracted some good athletes. When you applied to run at these events you had to submit your placings from your last three events, a handicapper would sort through the applicants and determine how many yards start you would be given on the scratch runners. I remember that this year the two scratch runners were a man called Fraw who had won many races in the Powderhall events in Scotland, and Hebden who was the East Anglian champion. I won the mile, came 2nd in the ½ mile a place in the 440 yards, 220 yards and 100 yards. I would like to point out that I had to cycle to Littleport from Lackenheath a distance of 10 miles, I had had a fish and chip lunch! and then I had run in all these events.

At this time there was also another lad in the village who ran and although we hadn't gone to any events together before on this occasion he asked if he could come with me, I agreed and as he had a little better start than me in each race we agreed to share any winnings. I regret to say that he didn't win a thing however the agreement stood and I shared my winnings with him, I wonder if the same would have happened if he had won and I hadn't. After all this I had to cycle the 10 miles home and be up for work at 6.30 the next morning.

I now became quite fond of a young lady named Molly Miller who lived in Bury St Edmunds and I found myself visiting there two or three times a week, in fact it was getting quite serious on my part but I don't feel that it was quite the same with her. In the mean time Barry and I were still getting around together and I remember when we went out on a Saturday night we would call in at the pub in Eriswell and buy ½ a bottle of V.P. wine for 2/6 [12½p] this would bolster our spirits when we were meeting the girls!

As I said I was now working on the Estate doing all kinds of work, fencing, ditching you name it I did it. We worked in a small gang consisting of; Moss Flack, Arthur Rutterford, Fred Flack, Fred Coleman (Keddy), Barry Hensby, Aubrey Rutterford and Sam Rutterford these last two were much older than the rest of us and basically they were in charge. The foreman was named Lock, he lived in the village of Icklingham and visited us a few times each week to see that we were getting on with the job, like all gangs we had our skiver (Fred Flack) he was never working and consequently when the foreman came round he always noticed him coming first and would quickly start to work, the foreman naturally thought that he was a good worker. If it so happened that anyone else was not working when the foreman came Fred would wait until the last minute and then say to whosoever was not working "you're caught." I was the youngest member of the gang and as such the foreman was kindly disposed to me, he had also known my father and my family background.

On the estate there were always numerous pheasants around and in fact they were quite tame. It was however strictly forbidden to touch them and as I was no longer in my own home I had no interest in doing so, with one or two of the others it was a different matter. Moss, Arthur and Keddy had no hesitation in regularly picking one up and ringing its neck, they had to be very careful as the gamekeepers were always around and kept a strict eye on us as we didn't live on the estate and would only lose our jobs and not our homes. The difficulty was when they caught the bird early in the day it had to be hidden usually under a bush or in some long grass, and they had to remember where they had hidden it. There would always be someone who would split on you especially if the person who saw you lived on the estate.

I mentioned before that in the sugar beet season the early plants were cut out and singled, as a gang we decided that instead of chopping out the beet and then going back along to do the singling we would do the whole operation in one go. We equipped ourselves with hoe heads and fitted a small stake (the wooden handle) about 6 inches long, then we chopped out the beet with the right hand and singled with the left. We found that although this was back breaking it was much quicker and as we had previously negotiated a price for the dual operation we earned much more money. The short hoe caught on and in no time at all it was used on all the farms in the area so in one respect we were the pioneers of the short hoe!!

Summer was now on it's way again and we had undertaken to do some ditching on a piecework basis and were now able to earn ourselves a little extra money, however war clouds were gathering over Europe and Mr Chamberlain was trotting to and fro with his little piece of paper.

The Air Force decided that they needed to enlarge their volunteer reserve, (like the territorial army) I saw my opportunity to get into the Air Force and volunteered. I reported to Mildenhall Aerodrome and filled in all the necessary forms and they said that they would let me know, after a short time I was called in for a medical which I passed and with a bible in my hand I duly swore to defend king and country should I be required to do so. Later lots of servicemen called themselves volunteer reserves and indeed wore the V.R. on their uniforms, however there were not that many true V.R.s and those that were had a service number that started with the number 7, my number was 757581.

In the spring of 1939 I became friendly with a couple named Watson, they were much older than me in fact he was a London Policeman who had retired to the village. He had lived in Eriswell as a young lad and his father still lived in the area. He asked me if I would teach him to drive a car, I did my best but he was never competent enough to pass a test, consequently if they wanted to go out anywhere they would ask me to drive them, I didn't receive any payment for this but they would let me borrow the car sometimes. When the war started they suspended the driving test and he was able to drive on his own, unfortunately he had an accident and was injured so he gave up driving. They were very good to me and on occasions when I came home on leave I stayed with them as I had no family home in the village.