

Joan Taylor (née Bennison) of 20 Church Drive, Great Ayton, interviewed by Ian Pearce and Dave Taylor (her son) on Friday 26 November 2004 at 2:00 pm.

Interviewers' comments in brackets and in red.

(A good place to start is if you can remember the day war was declared.)

It was a Sunday morning, I was doing nothing and I was in the garden and I heard the news on the radio at 11 o'clock in the morning. Then it was very quiet for really I would say, a couple of years. I think they bombed Middlesbrough once quite early.

We were living with my mother and father in those days, in Romany Road, you didn't get houses in those days. We had a nice big garden, it was a lovely morning and I know I was outside. Vic couldn't go to the war; he was in a reserve occupation making Bailey Bridges and things like that. And then I got this little job. He would be waiting for the bus to go onto a twelve-hour shift at nights and I was just coming home on my bike. That went on for – I can't remember how long I stayed at the station. It was an exciting sort of job and a frightening sort of job. I had to bring the goods trains in and do the points and all this business. The trouble was that the cattle mart at Stokesley and to bring them to Ayton they had to come all round the little stations with the goods trains. And it could be eight o'clock at night by the time they came and pouring down with rain. A chap would be standing waiting with a stick to drive them down to the village to where Dixons and people wanted them. Then we got all the when they were building the camp for Civil Defence, it wasn't built for the Army, all the stuff for that came into Ayton Station. So I had to help unload trucks. Then the fish from Whitby used to come to the Station and the papers Whitby Gazette. We had quite a few passengers.

(How many of you were there at the Station?)

The Stationmaster and me. Mr Howe, he lived in the Station House. There was another fellow who used to come in to help in the yard when the goods were coming in. We sold coal. This old chap used to come in with his horse and cart and you weighed him in he always brought me a rosy apple, and then you weighed him out again. He got as much coal as he wanted on his cart and then he went off with that. We got pigeons and everything like that. There was a delivery lorry based at the station. When you think about it now, I dread to think. It was blackout, we were all blacked out. Vic used to sometimes get onto the other shift and he could come up with me. But we had a good war really.

(There would be German planes flying overhead sometimes?)

Well there would be but we didn't take any notice. The only time we did was when they were bombing Middlesbrough Station and I got a message saying that the five past one coming down from Whitby hadn't to go any further, I had to stop it. I think he crawled along as far as Nunthorpe, he wasn't allowed to go near Middlesbrough Station. I don't think there was a lot of damage or anybody hurt.

(Was there any traffic particularly associated with the war?)

The station was well used but there could have been things in the night that we didn't know about. I didn't come across any troop movements but they would have moved them at night. You got soldiers in the village because there

was a gun site round the corner there and there were soldiers based in Ayton when they brought the prisoners up to Undercliffe. There was some in Addison Road, but they were 'Intelligence' what intelligence I don't know. They were more like officers living in that big bungalow down Addison Road. And there were soldiers around us because we used to have dances in the sweat box. You got all sorts of soldiers. There must have been some German prisoners up there as well because my granny had her daughter living with her, Auntie Lil, and she got friendly with, well she befriended them, a couple of German prisoners and they kept in touch for a very long time. They were harmless enough, we used to make them a drink or soup or something like that, I suppose we shouldn't have done it but we did.

(Just going back to the Italians, did you see much of them?)

Not a lot because as I say we didn't get out much. You went out to work and then you came home at night. But they used to get down into the village, to the fish and chip shop and they used to come down for that. That's why you want Ronnie if you can get him to talk, because he came with them. The Fish and Chip Shop was where the Betting Shop was, now a hairdresser. But they were 'about' you know. I can't say that I had anything to do with them, others did have! Apart from coming to the dances.

(You would be near to Undercliffe when you were at the station?)

I don't think there would be any at that time. I mean '42 the war hadn't really got going. I don't think there was any then.

(Did the normal rail timetable operate during the war?)

Yes, in fact I don't think it's changed much now. We used to get people who were in business, Byes and people like that, every morning going in on the train to Middlesbrough. It was quite a busy station. There was always a train at eight. It was what came in and out Nothing unusual But I can just remember smelling fish and the pigeons. They sent them off up the line for pigeon racing

(That was still going on during the war time?)

Oh yes. There were quite a few men in Ayton on reserve occupations. The buses were always packed with workmen going into Middlesbrough and they were always on time. You could set your watch by them.

(The railway company would be the LNER?)

Yes. The engines were green. My husband once fell out of the train. His mother had a shop in Middlesbrough, selling cigarettes and that sort of thing. He used to go down to see her and get a case full of stuff to bring back. He always talked to people and he was talking to somebody in the carriage and he must have thought he was on the bus because he walked to the door, opened it and got out. Fortunately it had just got under the bridge and he fell onto the platform. The guard said "Ee, who's that?" and I said "Some silly bugger" I was right! He was lucky he didn't hurt himself.

I don't think it really dawned. You know you aren't losing your husband, you know he can't go, but I had four brothers and they all went. That was a worrying time, especially our Stan the young one because he was in the Tank Corps. He had curvature of the spine but they still took him. He ended up as batman to a Colonel. But at the time they were sending some of them to be Bevin Boys and I thought if that happened to him that would be it.

(How did you get onto the railway, had you volunteered?)

No, directed. I got a letter from the employment people. I would go for an interview somewhere but I can't remember where.

(You got a uniform did you?)

Oh yes. Great thick coats.

(What sort of training did you get - did you get any training?)

NO, no. When I went up there he showed me how to issue tickets and things like that. There was the tablet as we called it, a ring with a thing on the bottom, and I had to walk out of the station, past the Stationmaster's House, and that's where the points were. And the train would be coming in from Battersby. I had nothing to do with the ordinary train, the service train, but this was for goods that came in and he wanted to be in the goods yard. You had to get it right and I nearly didn't get it right one day. I might have had a great big engine on top of me! If you didn't get the points over quick enough you would derail it. If you didn't get the points back over quick enough the next train from Battersby would have been off. It would have been so easy to do, yet we managed.

(You didn't have to pass any tests?)

No nothing like that. It didn't matter how daft you were! They weren't that fussy. Mr Howe, he was the Stationmaster and I was assistant to him. He showed me what to do and you just had to get on with it. No training. Some of the others went on the line, bogies, platelayers they called them. Some of the girls. I never came in contact with them apart from when they went off in the morning. I worked different shifts to them.

(Were there any women on the trains, drivers?)

No, funnily enough they were always men. They were. We never had a female guard. If they wanted coal, the tradesmen, they were coming up all the time, and we had a wagon delivering parcels. And you had to keep the place tidy.

(Was the coal in short supply?)

I don't know, I would think it was, it would have been rationed.

(Did people ever try to pinch some?)

They probably did, but nobody bothered. There were two or three different types of coal came in; small stuff, some better stuff and then the big lumps. There were different sections and the engine had to go up to the top and drop the coal through. There was a hand-operated crane. I tell you what, at harvest time the grain used to come up there and it was in big sacks, not a hundredweight, twice that, and they used the crane a bit then to load that on the trains to go to where ever. It was exciting. Stokesley Mart – we'd get the message that there's so many for you at Great Ayton and you had to wait. I'd known it be sheeting down, no lights at all, and then off these things would run off and they had to be guided down the road.

(Did you ever get people getting off the train who were lost and needed directions?)

No, and you would have been suspicious if you had one like that. I wouldn't say I was suspicious of anyone on the station, but when you are young you aren't scared of anything. I expect I would be now. But of course there were people who lived at Gribdale and they would be going up and down in the dark. We were allowed a few paraffin lamps on the platform and the chaps moving the animals could have a hand torch.

(When the war finished you ended on the railway?)

Oh I finished before then. Finished before then because my mother was always ill and it just got too much and I was allowed to leave. I just think how things are wasted now, but when I gave my notice and wanted to be away, two men came out to interview me and asked me why I wanted to leave. And I said why and they wouldn't believe me and they said I was having a baby. I said "I'm not having a baby". I must have always had a big tummy and I was wearing trousers. Why was it necessary for two men to come out in times like it was?

I wouldn't have missed it, I enjoyed being there. And I had ten pounds a week as well. That wasn't bad at all. I don't know what I would spend it on. When he (her husband Vic) was at home he was getting good money on shifts, but when he went to Peterborough, to Baker Perkins there, by the time he had paid his lodgings and that I didn't get anything from him. So I suppose my money would just go.

Once the Stationmaster's House, just beyond the platform, the leaves from all the trees round about had filled the gutters and a spark from the engine set them on fire. What a going on! I don't know how many fire engines turned up. That was during the war, while I was there. The fire engines came from Stokesley and I believe one came from Middlesbrough. That's all it was, leaves in the guttering.

(You said you were working shifts, how did that work out?)

I use to be up there at eight o'clock, and Howe would turn up about ten. I don't remember if I worked there all day. There was quite a lot of stuff coming in when they were building the Civil Defence place. All the sheeting for the roof and things like that, all that stuff coming in there then. I can't remember the exact hours I worked. Howe was supposed to be there all of the time, but he was all right. A bit of a grump, a bit of a Conservative Club man, he went out quite a bit down there! But he was all right, I never fell out with him.

(There was a normal timetable during the day, but you mentioned the possible special movements at night?)

We wouldn't be told if they were coming through with troops at night because the line would be cleared. I'm nearly sure they did that. We got to know what was coming round from Potto and all those stations. If it was your shift you had to stay, if it was his shift he have to stay, that's how it worked.