Waiting to Enlist in the London Blitz
By Francis Bennion

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Bombed Inner Temple library on day of the bombing (19 September 1940)
Waiting to Enlist in the London Blitz

By Flying Officer F. A. R. Bennion RAFVR (191712)

[From my unpublished autobiography]

On the declaration of war against Germany on 3 September 1939, Kodak wrote to inform me that everything about their affairs had been frozen for the duration. This phrase ‘for the duration’ was to become familiar to the British people. It was a shortened form of ‘for the duration of hostilities’, but it came to mean ‘till things get back to normal’ or more often ‘till we’ve had time to think, and work things out’. In retrospect it seems odd that Kodak should have shut down on the training of apprentices just at the moment when they were going to be most needed, but I didn’t think of that at the time. What I wanted was to get into the war in an active capacity as soon as possible. Meanwhile, having left school, I needed to find work. My earnings were needed to help out the family budget, always under strain from my father’s gambling on the horses.

So I got a job as an errand boy to a firm of chemists at 7s 6d a week. They were nothing like the Kodak chemists I would have been enrolled with if it had not been for Hitler and Chamberlain. These were what we would now call pharmacists, a firm known as Timothy White’s & Taylor’s. They entrusted me with a black-enamelled bicycle that had a deep brown basket in front. On this I sped around the Harrow area delivering medicines neatly wrapped in white paper, labelled with the hand-written address of the patient, and fastened with red sealing-wax. I felt I was being of service, and this pleased. It was also rather fun. I enjoyed being polite to old ladies, and even curmudgeonly old gentlemen. Uncle (my headmaster O. A. le Beau) was very cross when he heard about this condescension temporarily to join (as it were) the working class. At that time I had no idea of the class system.

The advantage of this job of delivering medicines was that it took up very little of my time, and this branch of Timothy White’s & Taylor’s, just like Boot’s, had in those days a circulating library. There are two things I remember about the joyous time when I was a sixteen-year old carefree youth equipped with an errand-boy’s bicycle in the midst of what was called (because nothing seemed to be happening) the phoney war. One is that two doors along from Timothy White’s & Taylor’s there was an Express Dairy where they sold a small delectable tart filled with fresh strawberries topped with red jelly and fresh cream. Day after day, I consumed one of these during my lunch break.

The other notable thing concerns the books in the library at Timothy White’s & Taylor’s. Just like Boot’s libraries it had many bookcases and very comfortable fauteuils. (I learnt that last term from the local cinemas of the time, who were very proud of what they saw as their advanced seating accommodation.) Indulgent bosses allowed me to lounge in the fauteuils at Timothy White’s & Taylor’s, and have a free run of the bookcases.

After a while I discovered that at the age of sixteen it was possible to earn rather more than seven shillings and sixpence a week in a full-time job. So I became employed for the dizzy sum of thirty-five shillings a week as an assistant in a grocer’s shop at South Harrow. Uncle was furious, but I ignored that. I enjoyed irritating Uncle. Besides, what other chance would I ever get to work in a grocer’s shop? The pub-loving G. K. Chesterton had made me intrigued with these useful tradesmen. I recalled his ‘Song against Grocers’.

God made the wicked Grocer
For a mystery and a sign,
That men might shun the awful shops
And go to inns to dine;
Where the bacon’s on the rafter
And the wine is in the wood,
And God that made good laughter
Has seen that they are good.

At the tender age of sixteen I was not quite sure exactly what this meant, but he understood and liked the lines that followed about the said wicked Grocer.

His props are not his children,
But pert lads underpaid,
Who call out ‘Cash!’ and bang about
To work his wicked trade;
He keeps a lady in a cage
Most cruelly all day,
And makes her count and calls her ‘Miss’
Until she fades away.

I knew what this meant. I had seen cashiers in such little booths. Disappointingly, it was not a feature of the shop in South Harrow. It housed no lady in a cage whom he might have succoured and defended. I found the work there very tiring, and have ever since felt some understanding of what shop workers have to undergo. I quickly came to realise that dealing with the public in this one-to-one way, one tiresome person after another, is demanding. Each shopper thinks only of their own needs, and never of yours, or so it seemed to me then. I have since come to realise it is not that simple.

My memories of that South Harrow grocer’s shop in 1939 are both general and specific. The general memory is of dealings with individual shoppers. As an errand boy delivering medicines I had merely handed them in at the designated houses, with little human contact. Now I had to relate to real living people. There were flashes of kindness from them, glimpses of the homes to which they were carrying these groceries they had bought from me. I was learning to connect on what seemed a large scale. Suddenly I realised there were a lot of people out there. That grocery shop expanded my horizons. I retain two specific memories.

One, I had to strap round my slim boyish figure a large white apron covering my body more or less from top to toe. That was the way grocery assistants presented themselves in the year 1939. To me it seemed strange and important, a kind of ritual clothing.

The other memory is more serious. It is of an incident that got me the sack from the South Harrow grocer’s shop. It relates to a characteristic I possessed, which might be called trustingness – if there is such a word. If someone or something presented as having a certain characteristic, I tended to believe in that characteristic. Such trust can be misplaced.

There I was, enveloped in the white apron from head to foot. A consignment of jam had just been delivered, and I was required to carry the container to a certain place in the shop. I was warned it was exotic jam, and very expensive. There were two dozen jars, specially ordered. The container was made of cardboard. On either side, near the top, holes had been cut in the cardboard obviously to accommodate, one on each side, the hands of anyone charged with transporting the container. I put my hands within these handles and lifted the box. It was unexpectedly heavy. I staggered across to the storeroom door. At some point on the short journey the weight became too much for the cardboard handles, and they both tore at the same moment. My trust was misplaced. The container crashed to the stone floor. The contents of twenty-four jars of expensive jam, specially ordered, mingled with shattered glass. The whole lot became at once unsaleable. My sin is unforgivable. I am discharged. For the first and last time in my life (as it turns out) I am given the sack.

Uncle told me it was no more than I deserved. Still I did not feel able to tell Uncle all this was tomfoolery till I was old enough to be taken on in a few months’ time as a prospective fighter pilot in His Majesty’s Royal Air Force. Uncle earnestly set about finding me a job for life in a
civilian sphere which, though respectably middle class, was not quite what he would have wished for the boy he loved. But then one had to be realistic, and my examination results had been poor. Uncle’s answer was Gosling’s Bank at 19 Fleet Street, London EC4.

By now I was just seventeen, old enough to realise that the fooling had to stop – or at least slow down. At sixteen it was all very well to be a chemist’s errand boy or grocer’s assistant. Now I really must enter the real world of middle class aspiration. A bank clerk in an old private bank in the famous City of London would do very well for a time. So to Gosling’s Bank (formerly Gosling & Sharpe’s Bank, now under the control of Barclay’s) I went.

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I recall a conversation with Uncle at that time that revealed my true long-distance intentions. I told him that I fancied going after the War to a college at Cambridge called Gonville and Caius, which I had read about. Not unnaturally, following my Latin training at the Lower School of John Lyon, I pronounced the latter part ‘Ky-ous’. He gently corrected me. It was, I learnt, pronounced ‘Keys’. I mention this because it has some connection with Harrow School and the John Lyon foundation. Dr John Caius (d. 1573) lived at nearby Ruislip, later known to me for its reservoir. ‘Caius’ college was that chosen by John Lyon in 1591 at which to place the two exhibitioners to Cambridge he had determined to provide for in the 1572 charter. So it would have been appropriate for me to go there. But all that was for the future.

My first recollection of this august institution known as Gosling’s Bank concerns awesome silence, red leather ledgers and dark reddish mahogany well polished. The counter was of dark reddish mahogany. So were all the shelves and cupboards. The bank ledgers were bound in leather of darkish red, with gilded inscriptions. The bank clerks sat on high stools and made entries with pens dipped in inkwells. To my disappointment, they were not quill pens: their nibs were of steel. I remember an advertisement of the time-

They come as a boon and a blessing to men,  
The Pickwick, the Owl and the Waverley pen.

The customers of this private bank, founded in 1650, had always included the exalted, such as the poets Alexander Pope and William Cowper, the Prime Ministers Lord Grey and Lord Liverpool, the historian Edward Gibbon and his father before him, and the great Lord Chief Justice Lord Ellenborough. It was the same in my time. Stacked round the walls were black enamelled tin boxes bearing the august names of clients in letters of white paint. Lord Elphinstone, whose son and heir was known as the Master of Elphinstone. The Marquess of Lothian, Earl Ancaster, and so forth. I was aghast at all this and suitably impressed, but speedily recovered my sang-froid.

More important in my life at that time were the two youths who were immediately senior to me, and of course gave me the hard time I later realised was to be expected. Egerton was slender, slight and dashing. Highly intelligent, he knew how to be cruel in a sensitive and so more effective way. The other youth (whose name escapes me) was burly, coarse and crude – and equally determined to dominate. Somehow I danced away from the worst excesses of their bullying. I had that confidence and insouciance that goes with being male and seventeen – and possessed of a certain self-knowledge, and a plentiful quick intelligence.

Each customer of this august bank had a passbook with an ivory leather cover and thick bluish pages with red lines. Every entry was laboriously made by hand. I recall one male cashier, aged about thirty, who had the dark handsome looks of a Clark Gable. He had the same magnetism too, and I worshipped him from afar. He had what is nowadays called charisma. A smile from him, with the white teeth above the dark shaven chin, was to be cherished. He carried around with him a sort of dominance, as if by right. And yet he was only a bank cashier, perched on his stool and making entries, day after day, with his faithful Waverley (or perhaps Pickwick) pen, in the calf-bound ledgers. Though he truly belonged in Hollywood here he was working away in Fleet Street, a wartime wage slave.
One of my duties at the Bank was to serve the two elderly survivors who were known as Local Directors, Mr Frank Gosling and Mr Archie Gosling. They were the last of the Victorian Goslings, founders of the bank. The wolfish Barclay organisation had recently swallowed up modest Gosling & Sharpe's Bank at 19 Fleet Street, but graciously allowed these two dodderers to remain there until they died off. So far as I could see, their only function was to sign things. I was deputed to take in things for them to sign. They both wore identical frock coats, though their signatures were very different. Mr Archie, a tall large man with a puffy red face and white walrus moustache, signed with a lengthy flowing signature, clearly legible. Mr Frank, a cramped small man, had a signature to match. It was scarcely more than a series of small black jags. He was a descendant and namesake of a succession of Goslings who bore the Christian name Francis.

I noticed that no calendar was on display in the banking hall, and thought this unbecoming. I decided to make one. I bought a packet of big red numbers and some cardboard at a stationers. Using a big pot of white paste I found in the typing pool I solemnly stuck the figures on the card and glued together a cardboard holder to put them in. I stood it on the mahogany counter in a prominent position. Each day, on my entry sharp at nine o’clock when the doors opened, I changed the date. No one said anything, but I noted that customers frequently looked at the date. I felt strangely satisfied.

After a while I was sent to work upstairs in what was called the Stock Room. Here the man in charge was the elderly Mr Jones, well-known to be henpecked. One of my jobs was to cut the coupons from the bearer bonds deposited by our wealthy customers, and send them in for collection. Among these customers was Sir James Cockburn, tenth baronet. I knew perfectly well that this name was pronounced Coburn, yet I impudently challenged the henpecked Mr Jones by calling it to his face COCKBURN as spelt. Jones blinked back at me, registering the challenge, but said nothing. At that moment Mrs Jones waltzed in, brandishing a shopping list. I knew what that meant, and tactfully withdrew. I felt pity for the poor old fellow.

German bombs now began to fall on London. The phoney war was over, and the fight was on. My father and I travelled daily on the so-called workmen’s train from Rayners Lane to the targeted City of London. To gain the advantage of the low fare offered to ‘workmen’ all you had to do was get on the train before seven o’clock in the morning; proof of actual artisan status not being required. The train got me to Fleet Street an hour before the bank opened at nine o’clock. I travelled from Holborn station (where I had to change) on a peculiar little tube line, with no intermediate stations, to Aldwych. My habit was then to walk to the nearby Express Dairy and have a drink of hot ginger. Because of the heat, the glass was placed in a metal holder with a handle. I felt important placing this interesting device to my lips, and eyeing through the plate glass window the early morning London traffic. After that I would start on my perambulation.

The purpose of this perambulation was to inspect the damage that German bombers had inflicted during the night. Buildings I had known yesterday, and for long before, were suddenly reduced to rubble. I stared at the ruins, wondering. The occupants’ way of life was suddenly exposed. In an unsuspected bedroom at the top of a building, suddenly thrown open, pyjama legs were exposed to the light of day. My abiding recollection is of the smell hanging over these sudden exposures. Predominantly, it was the smell of dust arising from places long enclosed, and long concealed from light and air. It was also the smell of sundered brickwork, cement unwontedly disturbed, and blocks of stone cast asunder. By the time I arrived each morning, the bodies had been removed.

For me the most striking image was the sight of the Inner Temple library split from top to bottom by bombing which occurred in the early morning of 19 September 1940. Through several storeys, thousands of law books tumbled down in their sudden exposure to the open air. A seed was sown in me that day, though at the time I did not know it. After the war I became a barrister.
Time marched on. A letter arrived from the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve headquarters at Uxbridge. I had at last become old enough to enlist.