

# Kenley Revival Oral History Project

## Transcript of interview with Robin Chandler 31<sup>st</sup> January 2017

Interviewer: Carol Tysall; filmed by Amy Todd

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### Transcript of recording 00015

My name is Robin Chandler and I was born in Epsom on 12<sup>th</sup> July 1936.

**Carol: What is your link to Kenley?** My family, we lived in Old Lodge Lane Purley which was a long way from Purley but that was the postal address, 248, and we lived there throughout the course of the Second World War.

**Carol: And what age were you when you were first aware of what was happening around you?** I was aware that the war commenced in 1939 but, of course, my main memories are from 1940 to 1945.

**Carol: Would you like to tell us a little bit about what those memories were then?** Yes, I remember distinctly the 18<sup>th</sup> August 1940 because Kenley was pretty badly damaged on that day and our garden sloped quite a steep slope upwards, and my father pulled me up the top of the garden and said "look there is the smoke coming from Kenley" so I remember that very vividly. I then also remember the subsequent blitz although we were well south of London, the house diagonally opposite was hit by a bomb although the bomb did not go off luckily. It was purely demolished by kinetic damage really from the bomb. We had a shelter dug in the back garden at that stage, and I remember this bomb coming down sounding rather like a steam engine because there were a lot of steam engines then so I said to my mother "it is a steam engine" and she said "no it's a bomb". Subsequently of course it didn't go off, thank goodness, otherwise we might have got a bit of damage.

**Carol: And did you see the planes going over head?** I saw a lot when Kenley became a big flying wing. I saw a lot of Spitfires about because the house was directly behind the subsidiary runway at Kenley so we had a lot of aircraft coming over the top and landing during the latter parts of the war.

**Carol: Were they close to the house?** Yes they were straight over the top.

**Carol: did you ever go up to the airfield during that time?** Yes but it was guarded and we couldn't get too near it. I remember them putting dummy aircraft on the airfield in the 1944-5 when the airfield was less used; and my father's favourite pub was the Wattenden Arms which was just at the top of Old Lodge lane

**Carol: What do you remember about the airfield itself? Did you ever meet any of the airmen for example or the people working in it?** No we never met anybody from there. There were a number of anti-aircraft sites around the airfield and I remember going to them as a young lad and talking to the soldiers but that's really my memory of the actual airfield.

**Carol: were you aware how many people there were or that there were lots of foreign airmen stationed there or was it completely cut off?** It was completely cut off. I think they had quite good security really.

**Carol:** Can you tell us a little bit more about what your life was like during the war? Of course the war started when I was 3 and ended when I was 9 so from a memory point of view that was my memory of how life was between 3 and 9 and all my childhood chums. We didn't really appreciate what a hard time our parents had actually. My father was in the First World War and he was working on some railway throughout the Second World War and my mother worked extraordinarily hard to keep house and home together. There was rationing. I remember going out and collecting rosehips there was a big rosehip for vitamin C. My school was a small preparatory school down Old Lodge Lane where a terrifying lady called Miss Routledge held sway and we chanted our 4 times table every day, day in day out, so I can just about remember that. But it was a good childhood really. You walked everywhere or you got the bus or you got the train and if you were lucky enough to have a bike as I was later on in the war, you bicycled everywhere so you were very fit and you wore your shoes out very quickly so there were a lot of complaints from my parents: "You're wearing your shoe leather out again".

**Carol:** and what do you remember about the food that you did eat then as it was rationing? We had a garden: my father was a very keen gardener I suppose we all had to be, so we ate bread, potatoes; ration books I remember very well. It's very difficult to, I mean it was very plain food. We had a big excitement was to get a bottle of orange juice which was this flat concentrated orange juice and I can taste it to this day actually. And we had MOF in blue tins (Ministry of Food) which were a sort of porridge for children and cod liver oil and malt which I hated and so on and so forth.

**Carol:** And you say you were very active. Was that outside school or was your school sporty? Yes it was a quite a sporty school. We had a play and exercise area/track but it was mainly that you were walking to school and walking back, and walking to school and walking back. So everything was done on foot or the 238 bus took us into Purley a single decker.

**Carol:** What other memories do you have actually of the 18th August? Can I go back to that as you were talking about it? No I don't. I remember being taken down into the shelter we had and taken to the top of the garden. Our shelter was not the standard Andersen shelter. My father, working on the railways, had access to sleepers, wooden sleepers so he dug a hole in the back garden and put sleepers over the top and ran a cable out of the French windows at the back of the house and we had a small fire, a small electric fire, in there and little bunk beds and I remember that in the winter of 1940-41 it was very cold and unpleasant and being in the shelter at night was not much fun.

**Carol:** Did you go to the shelter every night? Not every night no. When the sirens sounded we went to the shelter.

**Carol:** Was that very often can you remember? Did it seem like every night? It seemed like not every night but a lot. And of course the war developed and I can remember in a lot when I was 8 in 1944 I can remember the V1s and V2s.

**Carol:** And did any of them come down near you? Yes, the rear of the house was quite badly damaged from a blast from a V1, two V1s. And we were on the edge of the barrage balloon belt and I remember aircraft firing at them. Oh the other thing I forgot in the Blitz was collecting shrapnel. And you could pick it up and it was so hot. And I remember one V1 landing when my mother and I had gone to visit a friend in Purley and we were walking back over a recreation ground and there was an enormous bang so we rushed off to the nearest shelter and there was a double bang immediately afterwards which I assume was the double bang of it becoming supersonic immediately afterwards the explosive bang. You got a bang and then you got a double bang: bang bang from the going through the sound barrier old fashioned terminology. But V2s didn't trouble us but V1s did. They were very unpleasant as

even as a child of 8 you were very aware that when the engine stopped it was going to come down somewhere.

Carol: Could you explain for anyone who isn't clear, when you said you were on the limit of the barrage balloons how did that actually apply? Yes when the V1s first came across I believe the defence was a bit haphazard, after a very short period they put all the guns on the coast and then in between the coast and the barrage belt there was a free-for-all for the fighters they were attacking them and just north of us the barrage balloon belt started so there was a 3 belt system: guns on the coast, fighters and then you had a barrage balloon belt.

Carol: so do you know where that barrage balloon belt started? No I remember one getting loose, they used to get loose quite often actually, and turning itself around but I don't remember exactly where it was.

Carol: and you said that you could go and pick up the shrapnel while it was still hot. Is that something that you did on a regular basis? Oh yes. We all had competitions as to who could get the most shrapnel.

Carol: Who ran the competitions it wasn't organised by your school was it? Oh no it was just schoolmates.

Carol: And what did you do with it, once you had collected it? I think it was taken away from us actually. To be scrap metal as it was scrap.

Carol: And was the shrapnel mainly from the bombs that had exploded? No I think it was anti aircraft shrapnel.

Carol: What's the most memorable thing about those war years living in that area? Gosh that is a very difficult question. I think the most memorable thing really was the war ending as everybody was delighted and we had a street party, if you could call it that, and we had ice cream which was a real treat. The war itself was a bit of a drag trudge very difficult for my parents and all the parents about and when it ended we were delighted. And the streetlights came on.

Carol: Can I go back to one of the things you raised which was about the back of your house was destroyed at one point? It was the upstairs windows which were quite badly damaged they were blown in

Carol: And was anyone there at the time? No

Carol: So that was quite lucky. Were you in the shelter? No we were away, it was during the day?

Carol: did the bombing raids that you were aware of seem to come more during the day or during the night? During the night I think. During the Blitz period of 1940-41 and we had a sort of interregnum until 1944 when the V1s and V2s started.

Carol: And were you aware as a child of the politics of the war? Did you really know what it was all about? Yes a little bit as my father was very keen on radio and we used to listen to Lord Haw Haw on the radio and he used to explain what was going on. But the big thing about radio was the shows ITMA and all the other radio shows which were fun for a child. Radio was terribly important. We used to sit out and listen to it solemnly.

Carol: What was the scariest moment for you do you think? I didn't really feel any fear until 1944 when I was 8 and I really began to understand what was happening with the V1s in particular, and on my birthday 1944 I remember us all and my friends having to be put under a Morrison

shelter a big steel cage which was in the house and we all had to disappear under that because a V1 was coming. That was quite scary.

Carol: You said you did a lot of walking. Did you ever travel to London or further afield? No, we didn't go into London until right at the end of the war. I did travel to see my grandparents in Ashford. My father worked in Brighton of all places, he was evacuated there so we travelled on the train to Brighton and the rest of the time we cycled as there was no petrol for the cars.

Carol: And when you travelled by train were the trains as good as they are now? Southern Railway were fantastic and they didn't go on strike.

Carol: And do you remember any other events that took place that took place. You talked about the street party at the end but were there any other events that happened during the war that you remember? No not really. I was trying to think as we came down in the train prior to that what sort of life we lived. It was obviously a very limited life and you were limited to your local area really. I remember my grandfather had to come and live with us. He was once again another railway man and he lived in Weybridge with my father's brother until 1944 when my uncle's twins arrived, that I am still in touch with, and there was no room so he had to come and live with us in 1944 until he died actually in the 1950s. He had to have a leg amputated so he used to stump round the house on his leg and his crutch. That made a big difference to the family.

Carol: Was there ever any talk of you being evacuated? I did for a short period I went in the summer of 1944 I went to stay with one of my mother's sisters my aunt in Nottingham but I didn't stay there very long I came back when the school holidays finished and I had to go back to school.

Amy: I was going to ask if you had your house damaged but there was anyone else in the local area who was a bit more unfortunate? Yes. The house opposite well diagonally opposite was demolished with this bomb which didn't go off and was just a bombsite during the war. I went onto Google recently and had a wander up and down the street and I see it has been replaced by a bungalow which is totally out of keeping with other houses in the street.

Carol: So your house is still there? Yes and I looked at it.

Amy: I was going to ask: I was speaking to the local vicar now who is the vicar at St Luke's at the bottom of Whyteleafe Hill and he was telling me when he looks through records that the area surrounding Whyteleafe and on the way Purley it was very residential, not a lot of going on: small little pockets of houses. And he said it seems that the war really made that area: people started moving in as they saw there was a lot going on. Do you agree with that as he said before the war it was just a railway line and that the area seemed to grow and grow and grow after the war? Yes I can understand that. The house that we lived in was at the end of a ribbon development I am sure you know what I mean. The developers were pushing houses up all the little valleys in the North Downs and we were right at the end of that. I think after the war it did develop. It was always a residential area, Caterham Valley, and it was a suburb of London very good for commuter routes in and out of London and you could get out to Surrey and Sussex very quickly as I did after the war finished. I went to school in Croydon eventually for my secondary education but by then... In fact I did have a connection after the war with Kenley in that I joined the RAF section at my school CCF section and I used to go flying from Kenley in an Anson (dear old Anson). And there was a gliding school there and I had an interview (I joined the air force in 1954) and I had one of my first interviews in the old station at Kenley.

Amy: Can you remember what the building looked like? I can't remember I am afraid.

Amy: So what year was that? 1953

Amy: Was that national Service then? No I joined as a regular.

Amy: tell us the story about how you joined the RAF after that. I went to a school which was called Whitgift Middle School which is now Trinity School out at Shirley. Sadly they demolished our old school in North End Croydon and moved it out to Shirley. It's just the Whitgift Centre on the site of our lovely old school. Obviously aviation was a big thing because living near Kenley I joined the RAF section of the CCF at school and I did a gliding course at Hawkinge and I did a private pilot's licence at Redhill Flying Club. In fact I had a pilot's licence before I had a driving licence, which actually was not that uncommon actually as there were few cars about. And then I was attracted to the Air force and I joined the Air force. I did 21 years as a regular and 5 years on a reserve. And then I went into civil aviation.

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Amy: So do you think that growing up in that area and the RAF and airfields being very common encouraged you to go into that? Oh yes it did definitely. And aviation was the big thing immediately after the war. We had a massive aircraft industry which of course is rather diminished now.

Carol: did you have any connections with Croydon airfield? No. My father used to take me there on our bikes to watch the aeroplanes and I remember watching a Mosquito land there, but after the war of course it was still the airport for London and I can remember lying in bed hearing the mail plane leave Croydon for Paris with all the papers on board 6 o'clock in the morning regular as clockwork but of course it was not suitable for further use and Heathrow took over. It's a housing estate now.

Carol: And what do you remember about Kenley airfield after the war? I remember cycling up there a lot and watching the aeroplanes. I remember the gliding schools. I remember a Meteor landed there one day by mistake I think from Biggin Hill maybe it was short of fuel. Meteors drank fuel like it was going out of fashion and it ended up by the old rifle butts which were right on the perimeter road with a collapsed nosewheel and it sat there for ages. And I remember the old communication squadron aircraft there which we used to go to, to fly in: the Oxfords and the Ansons.

Carol: So when did you move away from the Kenley area? 1957, when I joined the air force.

Carol: When was the last time you visited it? When my parents and my father retired they moved to Stansted Road Caterham and in 1960 so my last long-term interest was in 1960 when they moved out of Old Lodge Lane. I did occasionally go back there. When I joined the CAA I worked out of Gatwick and the big building they have there, which was called the Belgrano I best not tell you why. I used to occasionally when I had an evening off I used to come up and have a look around and see what was happening; drive up the perimeter track; look at the revetement pans; and go for a pint in the Wattenden Arms as I was allowed to as I was a bit older.

Amy: As part of the project it has many different things that we do within it, one of them is interviewing people like yourself and another thing is that we are conserving and restoring all of the features on the airfield so the rifle range that will be conserved and the E pens they will be conserved and there is one on the left hand side of the airfield near Hayes Lane that now has a tribute in it. Yes I looked it up on Google. Well that pen is being fully restored to look like as it was when it was first built. Good. And that will change how the airfield looks and also at the minute there is some sparse signage isn't there Carol? Odd little boards here and there which tell you about World War 2 and the Battle of Britain history, and before that, World War 1 history. But as part of the project there is going to be completely new signage of the airfield

so at each of the features like the rifle range and an E pen there will be a big metal signage which is meant to look like a metal Spitfire wing and it will give the title like rifle range and say what that feature was used for and there will be traditional information boards then there will be two routes you could do like a World War 2 route or a nature route, as obviously it is also a common. So that's how the project is going to shape the airfield. So we do lots of things like oral history. We've got the website. You've seen the website? Yes. Maybe you could say a few words as to why you think it is important for children to learn about World War 2 and the Battle of Britain or just the public in general. Why is it important to keep those memories alive? I don't want to go down the history way too far but we're still living with the results of World War 2 in a very big way. Kenley was very significant during the Battle of Britain. It was a sector station and without the ability of the Royal Air Force to defend the airfields we would probably have lost the Battle of Britain and the Nazis might have come across the Channel which would have been difficult to say the least. Kenley is probably the best surviving example in my view of a Battle of Britain airfield and its significance is such that if we retain some memories of it and can explain to new generations its significance, it will reinforce the importance of the Battle of Britain and the Second World War.

Amy: That's lovely. That is it in a nutshell. That is why we do this.

Carol: I'd just like to be a bit nosy as I was a history teacher for many years... I was intrigued about your career in the RAF? I went back to Trinity School . I had a 2 year stint recruiting and I went back and one of my schools was Trinity School as I had been there. In those days we had the odd aircraft to spare and I was helicoptered into Trinity School and met the master there, whom I'd known for some years actually, and then I did a sort of inspection of the school. We also used to have rubber gliders which were on enormous rubber bands which were about 50 yards long which could be twanged across the airfield on these A frame gliders. And of course they took the chance of firing me off this thing so I stuck it on the ground very quickly. They were dangerous things actually because the rubber used to break and that was nasty. I got a cadetship at the RAF College Cranwell and I spent 3 years there and that was the way you entered as a permanent commission. I left there in 1957 after learning how to polish shoes very brightly and I did a tour in Germany on Canberras. There was an interesting little twist to that, on Canberras, because in 1941 602 squadron were at Kenley and I've got a book which shows a chap called Max Charlesworth who was on 602 squadron as a pilot officer. I've got a picture of him and my first flight commander in Germany on Canberras was Max Charlesworth in 1958 so we had this connection which I didn't realise at the time. He was a great character. He was called Max Charlesberg as he trained out of Karlsberg so he was called Max Charlesberg. And when I came back from Germany I was put onto maritime reconnaissance at Kinross up in Scotland. We did 3 years up there and my first child was born in Scotland. Very proud to be a Scot although she lives in England. And I got into the training world and I spent ten years as a flying instructor . And then I left when I was 39 and joined the Civil Aviation Authority and became a flight operations inspector based first of all in Liverpool and then in London and then they moved us all down to Gatwick when they built a big office there and in 1988 I retired at the age of 60 on time.

Carol: I was just wondering how much you were part of the Cold War? Very much so. When the Cold War in 1962 I was on a Shackleton squadron at Kinross and we were flying out as war sorties which was a bit sobering.

Carol: So did you feel 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis etc did you actually feel war was imminent at that point. Yes we did.

Carol : that is how my parents remember it as well It was very very hairy.

Amy: People seem to have very very vivid memories of that part of time don't they? The panic and the anxiety. We did a 16 hour trip in a Shackleton which is a terribly noisy beast, longest trip I ever did, right up off the Faroes and Iceland and thank god it never started.

Carol: Of all the planes that you've flown what did you like flying? Oh dear. It is a terribly difficult question to answer. It really is. The most interesting and satisfying really was the dear old Shackleton as it was a fascinating job from a job satisfaction point of view when I was training people for 10 years because you could get someone in who was having troubles with something and you could sort it out and you could go on and pass the course. And that was fantastic. You tended to get stuck in areas in the Air Force and I got stuck in training which towards the end of 10 years was a bit tedious. There we are.

Carol: And did you ever have an opportunity to fly one of those planes like the Spitfire that you'd seen in your childhood. . No. I would have loved to have flown a Lancaster although in fact the Shackleton was a development of the Lancaster if you take it back two generations. It had a colossal main spar half way down the aircraft and when I was flying I used to hurdle across it and I tried to get back in one at Duxford and I could hardly climb over the bloody They were enormous.

Carol: As a non aircraft specialist the spur down the middle? A spar SPAR . The wing has a main spar and it used to run right through the aircraft and all the loads be they aerodynamic or weight loads were fed into this main spar.

Carol: So it went right through the cabin? Yes that's right. Not like a 737. You had a main spar right through the cabin, right through the fuselage so you had to jump over it. It was there for a reason because of the bomb bay. It was an enormous bomb bay and you could put I don't know thousands of pounds of whatever it was in there and so the loads came off the main spar just below the 303 cabin.

Carol : And can I ask a question.. Why did you get in touch with Kenley Heritage Project? I was googling as I do and I occasionally used to go and look at Kenley situation and I came across the website and I thought I would get in contact.

Carol and Amy: we are very pleased that you did.

Carol Do you have any photos from your childhood? I may do though I would struggle to find them. If I do come across them I can scan them in.

Amy: that would be fantastic if you can. I've got one. Do you remember Kennards in Croydon: it was a big multiple store in Croydon and I remember being outfitted there once during the war and I had this dreadful cheesecutter hat on. I dreaded this bloody picture which my mother insisted I had. I'll did around and see what I can find.