



NOW A MAJOR NEW BBC SERIES

BRITAIN'S GREATEST GENERATION

HOW OUR PARENTS &
GRANDPARENTS MADE
THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

SUE ELLIOTT STEVE HUMPHRIES

BBC

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About the Book

This is the story of the men and women of a truly remarkable generation. Born into a world still reeling from the earth-shattering events of the Great War, they grew up during the appalling economic depression of the 1930s, witnessed the globe tear itself apart again during the Second World War, and emerged from post-war austerity determined to create a new society for their children.

It is the story of people who raised their families during the immense social upheaval of the Fifties and Sixties, as the world in which they had grown up changed inexorably. It is the story of the people who shaped the way we live now.

Britain's Greatest Generation tells this multi-faceted story through the eye-witness accounts of those who were there, from Japanese prisoner of war Fergus Anckorn to Dame Vera Lynn, from Bletchley Park veteran Jean Valentine to *Dad's Army* creator Jimmy Perry, and from fighter pilot Tom Neil to the Queen's cousin Margaret Rhodes. Together their testimony creates a vivid, often deeply moving picture of an extraordinary epoch - and the extraordinary people who lived through it.

About the Authors

Sue Elliott is the author of the bestselling memoir and history of adoption *Love Child* (Vermilion, 2005) and also of *The Children Who Fought Hitler* (John Murray, 2009) which relates the Second World War exploits of former pupils of the British Memorial School in Ypres and which was a BBC Four film.

Steve Humphries, described by *Broadcast* magazine as 'the king of oral history', is a former history and sociology lecturer at the University of Essex. After working as a producer at London Weekend Television where he made landmark series such as *The Making of Modern London* (for which he also co-wrote the accompanying four books), he set up Testimony Films in Bristol in 1992. Since then, Testimony has made over sixty single documentaries and series for all the public service broadcasters and for specialist digital channels.

Britain's Greatest Generation

How Our Parents & Grandparents Made
the Twentieth Century

Sue Elliott and Steve Humphries



Dedicated to Jim Humphries

and in memory of

Lily Ann Elliott (1920-96)

Tom Elliott (1922-2010)

Marjorie Heppelthwaite (1920-2000)

Marjorie Humphries (1924-92)

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Our special thanks to the editorial and marketing teams at Random House who have given enthusiastic encouragement and valuable guidance from the start, as has our splendid agent, Jane Turnbull. The attentions of Publishing Director Nigel Wilcockson improved the final result immeasurably; any remaining errors or infelicities are entirely our own. Finally, loving thanks to our long-suffering partners Bevan and Sally for their patience and support during this all-absorbing project.

Introduction

This book was completed at the end of the centenary year commemorating the start of the First World War and written in anticipation of the seventieth anniversary of the end of the Second in 2015. The last combatant in the 1914–18 war died in 2009, aged 111; the youngest surviving veterans from 1939–45 and those who also served on the home front are now approaching their nineties. It seems the right time – perhaps the last time – to capture some of their untold stories and celebrate their achievements, not just during the most devastating war of the twentieth century, but also across the following decades and into grand old age.

Although a few of the people who appear in these pages are better known than others, the majority bear only the distinction of living through, and responding to, the most extraordinary of times. They represent the generation born roughly between 1915 and 1925 who endured much, experienced much and built much of the world we know today. They are the last eyewitnesses to, and players in, some of the most momentous events in the history of these islands in the twentieth century. We believe that, as a generation, they deserve recognition and celebration whilst they are still here to tell us first-hand about their lives and to receive our thanks. That's what the BBC series *Britain's Greatest Generation*, made by Testimony Films, and this book set out to do.

When interviewed over the latter half of 2014 (a small number of interviews were held before that), the youngest of our subjects was 89, the oldest 109. Selected primarily for the richness and variety of their personal experiences

over eight, nine or ten decades and their ability to tell their stories fluently, they also represent many backgrounds and regions of the UK. Some were already seasoned interviewees; others were talking publicly for the first time. In every case the emotional power of their testimony deeply affected us as interviewers and writers. The interviews, conducted over one or two days and usually in their own homes, often appeared as rewarding for the subject as for us: talking about their lives offered the opportunity to recall happy times and come to terms with former pains. Though the experience could be emotionally draining and there were often tears, our subjects valued the chance to talk at length about times long gone but never forgotten.

Memory, of course, plays tricks on us all. Wherever possible the testimony of these now very elderly people has been checked against authoritative sources. Dates can be notoriously slippery - someone remembered meeting Aneurin Bevan at least a decade after his death - but we came across no substantial 'errors of memory'. The oldest memories often shone the brightest.

Quotes are taken verbatim from interview transcripts, edited only for clarity where necessary. These, with all their idiosyncrasies, not only reveal individual character but carry the bigger story.

So is this really Britain's greatest generation? We believe so. The reader will judge, not only from what follows, but from their own knowledge of people near and dear to them who were part of it. Children of the Edwardian age who grew up in the shadow of one catastrophic war and then had to fight another, they went on to make a post-war world that stretched from the atomic age to the digital age and beyond. They had their faults and their virtues. Without the universal benefits of education and access to limitless information, they were arguably more biddable, more patriotic and less cynical about their leaders than we are today. They put up with more and made do with less. Their

lives, marked by hardship, turmoil and danger, nevertheless now seem - to us and to them - so much less complicated than our own.

Of course they may share characteristics born of different times but they are not a homogeneous group; they remain individuals, bound together only by birthdate and by history. They are our parents, our grandparents, our great-grandparents. We should value their experience and learn from it.

For us, as children of Britain's greatest generation, it has been a unique privilege to record their story.

Sue Elliott and Steve Humphries
December 2014

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Memories of War

1914-1919

I didn't like what I saw. I couldn't have put it into words. I only knew there was something wrong about adults killing each other ... That doesn't achieve anything except death and sorrow.

Hetty Bower, aged eight in 1914

FOR NO GENERATION of Britons in modern history has war been such a defining feature as in the lives of those born just before, during and soon after the First World War. Those who remember little or were born too late to have known anything about the war itself will nevertheless have had their childhood and adolescence irrevocably shaped by its legacy in the years that followed. War was the formative event of their growing up and, 20 or so years later, of their adult lives too.

Memories from these very early childhoods, related now in old age, are those that have survived a long lifetime. They are necessarily impressionistic, the detail is scant, sometimes apparently trivial, but the impact is always profound: these are the memories that remain embedded even when what happened yesterday or just now escapes too easily into oblivion. Very often they are memories inextricably linked with love and pain. Emotions too deeply felt to be articulated or perhaps even understood, they can only be conveyed through snapshots of events, snippets of conversations, long-remembered songs.

From the very oldest of this generation we have the last eyewitness accounts of the impact and legacy of the First World War, seen through a child's eyes. These are not, of course, the familiar stories of trench horrors or men in action but of families at home waiting for news, struggling to survive, grieving their losses. Among them are strong memories of happy times with loved parents, but early experiences of bereavement, family disruption and disability, hardship and hunger linger long in the memory too. Simple pleasures and the deepest of sorrows mark the childhoods of this generation and so shape the people they go on to become.



In the early years of the war, while the country was still caught up in a mood of patriotic fervour, children took their cue from their parents: war with Germany was an exciting adventure, there was no question that Britain would emerge victorious – probably by Christmas – and those brave fathers who responded to the recruiting propaganda would soon return to them. In the meantime, there were fascinating new spectacles on the streets to enjoy.

Vera Price was born in Bristol in 1904 into an extended middle-class family. At the age of 109, she recalled seeing men marching off to war in August 1914.

We had friends who lived in Bath and they were coming over to spend [August] Bank Holiday Monday with us. They had two little boys and my parents had two little girls and we were great friends for years. We went to Temple Meads to meet them from the train. And they were just then sending the army men to Portsmouth by train to go over to France. And I can well remember that on the bridge over platforms one and eight I saw these little white spats on the soldiers going by the trelliswork of the bridge and I was absolutely fascinated by these little things, brilliantly white ... Oh, I well remember my father saying – the men were all chatting, you know – ‘Oh, it’s nothing very much. All be over by Christmas.’ And of course that was the 4th of August.

Another young girl who watched the men marching away in 1914 was Londoner Hetty Bower. Her Orthodox Jewish family was politically engaged and she took an interest in what was going on around her from an early age.

There's a song that we used to sing:

Lord Roberts and Kitchener, General Buller and White
They are the leaders for a terrible fight
When the war is over, we'll buy a lollypop
And send it off to Kruger with a Kaiser on the top.

I was nearly nine years old. We were told the schools would be closed as they were going to be used as recruiting centres. Well, we thought that was lovely, not having a school to go to. But it could be very boring, very quickly, and we were damn glad when our schools came back to us and we could go to school once more. I saw men leaving for the front because we passed the railway line at Dalston Junction on our way to school. We were up on the pavement and the railway was down there and we could wave and cheer them.

The pride and excitement of seeing the marching men was dispelled when, as the war progressed, she saw the injured and limbless return to the streets of London.

And then we saw the results of the war when the men came back with trouser leg rolled up because there was no leg to put in it, arm sleeve hanging down because there was no arm. I didn't like what I saw. I couldn't have put it into words. I only knew there was something wrong about adults killing each other when they should be sitting round a table [talking] about what they wanted and what they didn't want. Not killing each other. That doesn't achieve anything except death and sorrow.

Her sense of injustice stirred, Hetty resolved to become a pacifist.

At the outbreak of war Ellen Elston was six and her father was already a regular soldier, a company sergeant major in the East Surrey Regiment. He didn't go straight to the Western Front but started the war training recruits in Kent.

I remember going with my mother and brother on a visit to see my dad at Dover Castle. Dad had to drill the men and it was exciting to see all the soldiers lined up and our own dad taking them through their paces. We thought that was marvellous, watching through the narrow slits in the

wall. Afterwards all the men clustered round him and us: [we] were the sergeant major's kids, and we were carried around the square on the men's shoulders. One or two of the men put their new stiff hats on our heads, and others gave us a few coppers in change, so that we had lots to talk about when we went back to school.

For some of these children, their earliest memories are also some of the most dramatic. John Harrison was born a month before the outbreak of war in Farnborough, Hampshire, where his father held a senior position at the Royal Aircraft Factory. One of his earliest memories, probably in 1917, is of going with his mother to meet his father from work and passing the nearby prisoner-of-war camp where captured Germans were put to work cleaning aircraft engines. And as a young child he would be taken to see the aeroplanes in action:

My father came home one morning and said, 'We're going to see a brand new aircraft. It's got three wings, it's called the Tarrant. It's a bomber.' We went down there and there was this huge aircraft, with three wings and six engines. It trundled across the grass, lifted off, there was a great roar and it dived straight into the ground. What they didn't know in those days, because they'd got no testing facilities, was that if you put twin props in the front and four-bladed props at the bottom and turn them on full bore just as you get off the ground, it tilts you up. And that's what it did and killed the two pilots.

Bombing raids by German aeroplanes and Zeppelin airships plagued London and Britain's east coast towns between 1915 and 1917, causing thousands of deaths and injuries. Hetty Bower recalls their rudimentary sheltering arrangements in Hackney:

The runners would be running down the street shouting, 'Down to the bottom of your houses! Down to the bottom of your houses!' And what good that would have been with a direct hit is nobody's business. But we had a very large mahogany dining table and we used to take our pillows so we had a soft pillow to sit on. My eldest sister's husband had an HMV gramophone which he put on top of that large mahogany table and he would play lovely records in order to drown the anti-aircraft gun ... It was my first introduction to Beethoven's symphonies.

Despite the havoc and horror they wrought, a Zeppelin airship was a momentous sight that stopped traffic and people in their tracks. Gus Bialick was a very young child being wheeled through the streets of east London by his father, on leave from the army, when they witnessed an extraordinary spectacle.

In those days there weren't any sirens to warn you of enemy aircraft. There were policemen on bicycles with a megaphone shouting, 'Take cover! Take cover!' And a policeman on a bike came round a corner and shouted, 'Take cover!' and my father was pushing me in a pushchair towards the basement of a house. On the way there he said, 'Look up into the sky!' And there was this Zeppelin in flames drifting slowly over London. It had been shot down. It landed in north London in Barnet. It was an amazing sight because it was drifting slowly but it was ablaze. As a child, it made a great impression on me.

Though Gus, now over 100, remembers this as happening in 1917, it is more likely that he and his father were one of the hundreds of thousands of Londoners to witness the celebrated shooting down of the *L 31* in October 1916. It could be seen for over 35 miles in every direction before it finally came to earth in Potters Bar, just north of Barnet. The hero of the hour was Royal Flying Corps Second Lieutenant Tempest, who buzzed around the giant ship firing his machine gun until his incendiary bullets finally set the Zeppelin ablaze. *The Times* reported 'a gigantic pyramid of flames, red and orange, a ruined star falling slowly to earth. Its glare lit up the streets and gave a ruddy tint even to the waters of the Thames.'

Such acts of conspicuous and possibly foolhardy bravery were widely celebrated on the home front at a time when the news from Flanders was grim and would only get grimmer. Letters home rarely revealed the true rhythm of life in the trenches: hours of boredom and fruitless 'bull' in often appalling conditions interspersed with intense periods of bloody warfare. When fathers came home, the realities of war were unlikely to be shared with wives and sweethearts,

much less with children. But there were inevitably occasions when inquisitive ears weren't far from adult conversations. Vera Price remembers one occasion that made a lifelong impression on her.

My uncle was talking to my father – he must have been on leave from the front. They were talking and I was sitting way back. The war was going terribly badly for us and an order went out that no prisoners should be taken. They had to be shot. Uncle came across a German boy who begged him not to kill him. He was his mother's only son. Uncle said he was nearly in tears himself but he had to kill him, and he rammed the bayonet in. This affected me terribly but I knew I mustn't let it. I felt I just had to accept it.

A visit from a father on leave – even if granted because of an injury – was a rare occurrence, a cause for celebration and an event that even very elderly people remember clearly. Londoner Ellen Elston's father came home on leave in 1916.

In 1916 he was wounded on the Somme and I remember him coming home. We had a gramophone in those days and I can remember him getting me on his knee and singing a song that was very popular then:

And when I told them
How beautiful you are
They didn't believe me!
They didn't believe me!
Your lips, your eyes, your curly hair
Are in a class beyond compare.

Later generations were to become more familiar with the devastating parody of this gentle ballad that accompanies the closing scene of Richard Attenborough's 1969 film *Oh! What a Lovely War*, based on the stage musical of the same name:

And when they ask us
How dangerous it was,
Oh, we'll never tell them,
No, we'll never tell them ...

Not all the men who went away were combatants. Bill Frankland's father was a country parson in Cumbria. Bill, born in 1912, was a young child during the war but he remembers clearly his father's coming and going. The fact that he wasn't in the front line made Bill no less proud of his father.

One of my first memories of the First World War was my father going off as a padre. He went to France to begin with and I think he was there for about 18 months. I know my mother was delighted when he came back. I remember him having an injection, I think it was a TB injection, which caused a very sore arm and as a small boy I thought he'd been wounded. He finally went off to Alexandria and later Cairo, where he was in a hospital ship. He used to send these lovely postcards of the Sphinx and the Pyramids and they were very beautiful.

He had what's called a Sam Browne [belt] as an officer, that I inherited and wore at the beginning [of the Second World War] whenever I could, including when I got married. To me, wearing it was carrying on a tradition that there were things worth fighting for. We were told to fight for our country, and this is what we were doing. And I was lucky that I was an officer and so it was to me a privilege to wear something that he had worn in the First World War.

Vera Price's father was a skilled engineer with his own business and, though called up late in the war, he never served abroad. Vera and her siblings were fortunate to have him at home, but they were encouraged to make their own contribution to the war effort by cheering up injured soldiers in Bristol General Hospital.

Some of us girls - we were about 12 years old, I suppose - five or six of us used to go and sing patriotic songs to the men. They were in their blue hospital uniform, and I can remember the looks on their faces and how thrilled they were, that these little children ... Because they probably all had children of their own ... That was awfully good, we did that for quite a long time.

She still remembers snatches of the songs she sang: 'Keep the Home Fires Burning', 'It's a Long Way to Tipperary' and 'Pack Up Your Troubles ...':

Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag
And smile, smile, smile!

What's the use of worrying?
It never was worthwhile.
So, pack up your troubles in your old kit bag
And smile, smile, smile!

Smells are sometimes as powerful as images in the memory: Donald Overall, born in 1913, has a striking memory of his father.

I remember Dad coming home on leave and he used to sit me on his instep and hold my hands and rock me up and down on his leg in his army uniform. And he smelled of khaki and tobacco because he smoked a pipe. He'd carry me upstairs on his left shoulder and I'd have my head on his shoulder and I remember smelling his khaki uniform and his tobacco.



Much as the War Office letter or telegram was dreaded, uncertainty about the fate of a loved one was worse. The chaos of war and the difficulty of identifying badly damaged or decomposed bodies, compounded by clerical errors and communications problems, meant that some families were left in despairing limbo without a head of the household and without news of him. At a time when it was rare for mothers to work outside the home this made for financial as well as emotional distress. Many families experienced hardship. The lucky survived on charity; the destitute had only the workhouse.

Not all the families who faced hard times were poor and working class. By spring 1917 naval blockades of British merchant ships by German U-boats meant that imported food - which before the war had made up two-thirds of the country's needs by calorific value - was dangerously reduced. Meat, grain, sugar and fats were all in short supply and prices shot up. Even if mothers had the money, the goods often weren't available in the shops. A voluntary rationing scheme proved a dismal failure. Urban families fared the worst: if they couldn't grow their own food or rely on occasional supplies from friends or family in the country,

they went hungry. Even middle-class children were sent early to 'bag' a place in long queues outside shops rumoured to have a new consignment in. Vera Price was one of them.

There were big food shortages during the war. We used to hear - goodness knows how we heard it - but these rumours used to go round: there'd be margarine at Maypole [grocer's] today and people used to come from all over Bristol. At six in the morning they used to send their children into a queue to wait for their parents until it was time to go to school, when all the parents turned up, took the places the children were holding and waited, probably till midday ... And you were very lucky if you got to the door and found there was any margarine left.

Enid Wenban also was born into an affluent family in Surrey in 1920 and her father had a reserved occupation with the GPO during the war, but the impact of food shortages in 1917-18 nevertheless resonated through her family down the years:

My mother used to talk about how awful it was not being able to get food. She was reduced sometimes to giving my father carrots on toast for supper. She said if her parents hadn't sent her food parcels from time to time, she didn't know what she would have done. There was no rationing till right till the end of the war. You just couldn't get things. When the Second World War was looming, my mother started stockpiling tins of food like nobody's business. It really stuck with her. She talked about it a lot, so it made me realise what an awful business it was.

If experience of hardship and hunger had a lasting impact, so surely did the loss of a father. Of the nearly 900,000 military fatalities in the 1914-18 war, up to a third were fathers. At least a quarter of a million families were affected. The moment the news arrived is still a vivid and painful memory for this generation of war. News of the death of Donald Overall's father arrived in 1917.

I remember this distinctly. Mother opened the telegram, read it, and collapsed on the floor. What was in the telegram I never knew, but she collapsed on the floor and I was holding on to her skirt. I tried to wake her up. I couldn't work out what was wrong ... She said, 'Your father's dead, he's not coming back. You'll have to be the man of the house.'

Ellen Elston recalls the moment the news arrived of the death of her sergeant major father and how family life changed for ever:

I think we nearly forgot we had a dad, we didn't see much of him. Until one Sunday morning a telegram boy came and we thought, Ooh, a message from Dad! All excitement, all clustering round. And it was a telegram for my mother, saying my dad had been killed in action. Mum was upset all the time. I could hear her wandering round the house crying. I suppose she tried to put on a brave face, being the mother of six children. There was a big picture of Dad in a big gold frame, which she turned round to the wall. I suppose she just couldn't bear walking in the room seeing it.

For some children, there were no physical memories of their fathers at all. Charles Chilton was born in 1917 to a father who'd joined up underage, leaving behind a pregnant new wife. He was killed at Arras before he was able to meet his son.

Reading his letters home, his one ambition was to get back from France in order to see his baby when it was born. And when I was born my mother and grandmother wrote and told him so, and he was eager to get leave. But he never did get leave and so he never saw me.

For young Charles, the excitement of war made more of an impression than the shadowy figure that was his father:

A man came to our house and said he knew my father, served with him in the Sherwood Foresters. He said he saw my father just a few yards away standing up, and a shell exploded and he was no longer there. Nothing of him was found. Well, I boasted about it to my friends, I'm afraid. I didn't know my father, I didn't have any feeling for him. All he was was a photograph hanging on the wall. I'd never seen him, touched him. Even my mother never told me much about him.

Death was a commonplace in many families but the grieving process was made more difficult by the absence of the traditional rituals associated with a funeral and burial. All dead combatants, regardless of rank, were interred where they fell on the battlefields of Flanders or in the distant theatres of this first global war. Remains of the dead

were not, with rare exceptions, brought home for burial. There were so many, it would have been entirely impractical. In any case, for every body that could be identified and given a named grave in some foreign field, there was at least one other for whom identification could not be made or whose remains were missing altogether. For those fortunate enough to have a grave, the Imperial War Graves Commission, established in 1917, had begun its herculean task but the cemeteries took years to complete and few widows could afford the time or cost of a pilgrimage to a husband's grave.

Bereavement without a body, or without a grave to visit, was doubly painful. Deprived of established ritual, grief could be prolonged, with no recognised public outlet. War widows had to conceal their tears for self-preservation and to set an example of strength for their families and the wider world. Children, who would in peacetime have been involved in family funerals, took the lead from their mothers, feeling unable to show their distress. Ellen Elston, the eldest of six, remembers her special sense of responsibility after the news of her father's death:

Good neighbours would come round and offer their sympathy, feeling sorry for us, bringing us sweets and biscuits to cheer us up. But that was all. In no time at all Mother had made black-and-white-check dresses with a black belt for all the girls, and I can see us now, all walking down the street together and people looking at us because Father was well known in the community. I never cried in front of other people. You are too proud to let people see that things reach you, you are taught that. I wanted to cry, inwardly, but you didn't want anybody to see it, especially being the eldest. I kept everything inside because I daren't let the other children see me break down because they looked up to me, so I waited till I got to bed, and then I had a good cry, just as I'm sure Mum did when she was on her own.

Suppression of emotion, perhaps instilled by a parent or learned at a time when the enormity of loss was so difficult for everyone to comprehend, is a common characteristic of

this generation. Once embedded, for good or ill, this enforced stoicism lasted a lifetime.

The loss of a father often meant new responsibilities for the eldest child, even if they were still young themselves. When Donald Overall was told he'd now have to be 'the man of the house', he remembers responding with pride:

'What? Me, Mum?' Five years old. I had to stand up and be counted. I did. I did stand up straight because I wanted to be like my father. My younger brother was born and my mother said, 'You've got to look after him. He's your young brother.' I was the man of the house; I was ten feet tall.

Ellen Elston found herself mother to five siblings whilst her own mother went out to work.

I was only nine and I was looking after the family because I was the eldest. I didn't mind it most of the time. The bit I hated most was when the baby cried. I used to make up what they called a sugar tit - a piece of material with some sugar in - and make a knob and stick it in the baby's mouth hoping that it would suck and be quiet. I'd end up crying as well when the baby cried. It worried me because you didn't really know what to do to make her stop, you didn't know what was wrong.

The kindness of strangers in times of difficulty made an impression on the children who witnessed it. An unknown woman took pity on Ellen and her brother the first Christmas without their father:

My mother wasn't looking forward to Christmas, was she? I mean, killed in August, the first Christmas with us youngsters. I think she was making mince pies or something and my brother and I went for a walk and we stopped to look in this toy shop, admiring the things you knew you couldn't have. This lady came looking in the window too and she said, 'Why don't you go inside and look? It's cold out here.' So we went inside. She followed us in and all the different things we liked, she bought us! And my brother and I, we had a big bag full of all these lovely things. And she said, 'Now, you go straight home and you tell your mother that you met Mrs Christmas.'



When the war finally ended, it was a time for rejoicing but also for reflection and remembrance. Vera Price has a clear memory of 11 November 1918 as a beautiful day.

We were all at home and I was making mud pies in the garden for my little brothers and all of a sudden the factory hooters and church bells and anything that will make any kind of noise began raging all over Bristol. I've never heard such a noise in all my life. It was terrific, and I rushed up from the garden, rushed into the door and I said, 'It's the eleventh hour, of the eleventh day of the eleventh month!' And it was ... everybody was ... It was wonderful. It really was.

The institution of Armistice Day from 11 November 1919 took on personal significance for hundreds of thousands of bereaved families. On this day they could be part of a communal ritual that allowed them to express their own, as well as a nation's, grief. The return from France of the Unknown Soldier for burial in Westminster Abbey on Armistice Day 1920 was the occasion for the greatest outpouring of mass grief Britain had ever seen. The anonymous remains, selected at random for burial among kings, stood for all 'the Missing': the coffin on the gun carriage could contain any bereaved mother's son or grieving widow's husband. The massed bands, pipes and drums, the gun salute, the slow-march procession escorting the cortège: they all stood for the funeral denied to so many.

Donald Overall was there with his mother on that momentous day. They were in Whitehall, close enough to see the unveiling of the new permanent Cenotaph by the King on the first stroke of 11 o'clock, the signal for the silence. The crowds in this area - 10 and 20 deep, all the women in black, all the men hatless - were mostly there by invitation, allocated in a ballot of the bereaved. The remainder, many of whom had been queuing all night, had been let in at 8.15 a.m. until the allocated space was full and the barriers closed. Even so, many were turned away disappointed. It seems likely from Donald's account that he

and his mother were among those fortunate enough to have a personal invitation and therefore a ringside seat at one of the most solemn and significant events of the twentieth century.

We went up there on that opening day, and we got there early and we were quite close to the Cenotaph and we saw the Unknown Warrior come through on his gun carriage and King George V came out and there was a small service around the Cenotaph and he pulled the string and all the flags dropped down like that, and there was the Cenotaph resplendent in all its glory, far better than what it is today because it was brand new. I just stood there dumbfounded.

And on every Armistice Day that followed, he remembers with tears in his eyes the silence at 11 o'clock being strictly observed.

On the 11th of November, it didn't matter what day of the week it was, everything stopped. Everything. Not even a newspaper blowing across the street. Nobody dared - nobody wanted - to move. And if anybody did move, the crowd would have lynched him. My mother used to stand there, holding us two kids, and I can remember ... Yes, Christ, I can remember it.

For those born in the years immediately after the 1918 Armistice, the war still cast a baleful shadow, especially for those whose fathers returned with physical or mental injuries. Mabel McCoy was born in 1921 to a middle-class Manchester family. She remembers, as a five-year-old, watching the disabled servicemen in an Armistice Day parade:

It was appalling: some had no arms, some with crutches. And the men with no legs, that was the worst thing because they were on home-made little trolleys with wheels on. On this parade they had this soldier with them pushing them along, and the ones who were blind had a soldier leading them. And they weren't a proper marching column, they were shuffling. There were those who'd been gassed and who looked terribly unhealthy. This small child of five watching this great column of men who'd survived but who'd been terribly injured.

Well into the 1920s reminders of the war were everywhere. Frank Rosier, born in Chelsea in 1925, grew up in a close-knit family on a 'homes for heroes' estate in what was then a poor part of London, close to the Lord Roberts Workshop, a charity set up during the war to employ disabled ex-servicemen.

My father had been in the war and my big uncle Jack had lost a leg. I used to live near a factory where disabled people made furniture; my uncle Jack worked there. We were surrounded by the war - ladies in black walking about, and on the 11th of the 11th it was strictly observed - and if I asked Dad about the war, he'd tell me to shut up, it was such a dreadful war. I can never remember them ever talking about it, but you were surrounded by it. The wounded were treated awfully, put on a little trolley and pushed about.

Mabel McCoy's father had survived without physical injury but not without cost. He'd had a good job in the cotton trade but had joined the Lancashire Fusiliers at the outbreak of war and served until he was demobbed in 1919. The war had affected him in ways that troubled Mabel:

In bed he always slept with the sheets and blankets wrapped completely around his head with just his nose sticking out - I asked my mother about this and she explained to me that it was because he was terrified of the rats he saw during the war. He did a lot of things with me as a child, he'd take me for walks and we'd play word games and number games as we walked. On one of these walks behind our house we were going over a dry ditch and suddenly my father froze. He'd seen a rat down there, in the ditch. He was terrified, absolutely terrified. He recovered himself once the rat was gone. That was a long time afterwards, I would have been about 11, a good 15 or 20 years on from the war.

In common with many fathers returning from a difficult war, it was never spoken of.

It was very difficult for me as a child to understand why my father never spoke about his experiences in the war. My mother never encouraged him to, but I think that was because she had had a soldier upbringing from her soldier father. She understood that my father was traumatised by what had happened to him during his five years in France. But I did realise that when he was extremely emotionally upset he'd want to play his piano.

He came from a musical family. He had a Collard & Collard, very expensive, the best British piano you could buy then. When he came back from the war, he would sit for hours playing, but he tended to like music that was aggressive and noisy. When he was feeling particularly upset or down, he would sit there and play the Beethoven *Appassionata* at full throttle and I think it was his way of getting rid of the frustrations inside him. The music was talking to him, perhaps consoling him.

Striking in these testimonies about the effects on their lives of the First World War is the obvious affection these men and women felt for their fathers even if they were largely absent – or removed altogether – at a formative time in their young lives. Reading between the lines, the influence of strong mothers holding families together through the worst of times kept the memory of absent fathers alive for their children and helped them live with the men who returned, perhaps much changed. The mothers' role in influencing the attitudes, values and fortunes of this generation comes to the fore in the interwar years as they pass through childhood into adolescence.

Some common themes are already emerging: children having to adapt to the dislocation of family life caused by bereavement, disability and financial hardship; learning emotional control; taking on responsibility for others at an early age; appreciating help and giving it in return; dealing with loss, and accepting that life deals blows and isn't always fair. The stoicism, resilience and emotional reticence forged by these early experiences were all to become hallmarks of this generation.

Whatever they understood of the war – and little of substance was passed on at the time by fathers – parents, school and print media instilled in these children a strong sense of nationhood, of belonging in a country at the heart of a great empire of which they should be proud. Public ritual reinforced patriotism and a sense of being part of something bigger than self and family, even if this offered no tangible help in times of trouble. As Charles Chilton recalled: 'Most of us didn't have soles to our shoes and

some of us didn't have shirts to our backs, but we were very proud of being British.'

Whether readily articulated, conscious or not, for all those born under its shadow, the 1914-18 war left an indelible mark. They witnessed its aftermath and experienced its devastating effects. These have never been forgotten. As Donald Overall said, when interviewed as a 95-year-old, of a father he hardly knew: 'I missed him as a boy and I miss him as an old man.'

In the following decades there would be many more challenges both personal and national to mould this generation of war.

2

Childhood

1920-1929

We are the King's Cross Boys
We know our manners
We spend our tanners
We are respected wherever we go
Eye-tiddly-eye-tie, eat brown bread
Ever seen a donkey drop down dead?
We are the King's Cross Boys.

Charles Chilton, aged ten in 1927

WHILE CHARLES CHILTON and his gang marked out their childhood territory in the backstreets of King's Cross, the young Margaret Rhodes was practising her curtsey for the imminent arrival of Queen Mary for tea at her father's Scottish castle. The aftershocks of the First World War still convulsed the adult world in the 1920s: unprecedented political and financial instability, industrial unrest and social upheaval became hallmarks of the decade, though for the moment class divides stayed firmly entrenched. Against this tumultuous background, whether they were growing up in poverty or a palace, this was the time for our generation to form the interests, habits and values that would see them through a lifetime of unique challenges.

At ten, Charles Chilton wasn't yet able to articulate any of the personal characteristics implicit in his gang's anthem, but they are all there: pride, independence, giving and demanding respect, loyalty to friends and community,