

**Exeter in wartime: a first-hand account by a Mixed Heritage Mother of six Mrs Hendy of Wonford (1917-2002)**

*By Ghee Bowman, September 2013*

Mrs Hendy was born Dorothea Augusta Colvin in St Blazey near St Austell in Cornwall. Her mother was a local White woman, and her father was a Black sea captain, shipping cargo probably from Jamaica. They had five children together (three girls and two boys), close in age she was the fourth, born on June 12<sup>th</sup>, 1917.



The father, whose name is not known, was killed on his boat when a mast fell and caught him on the head. Her mother then settled down with a White man, and they brought up these five Mixed Heritage children together.

Sue Evens describes them as being “the first black family in Cornwall at that time” – the period immediately after the first World War, and said “Cornwall is a very funny place to live – if you don’t fit in, you don’t fit in”

When she was 21, Dorothea moved to Exeter. She recalled:

“The war came in 1939, I was about 21, I was single, I had no dependants so the Employment Agency said “Right – you’re going into war work”. So I either had to go into the services or do light engineering....I didn’t fancy the services so I took light engineering and I was trained there in Queen Street and my first job was in an aircraft factory at Tan Lane. We used to do aircraft work, and my job was to rivet spars.

The war was on and we used to do 12 hours a shift every fortnight, from 7 in the morning to 7 at night, the day shift, and 7 at night till 7 in the morning your night shift. Now what happened there, I had appendicitis with peritonitis, and the doctor said no more of that work, no more standing on concrete. He said you’ll have to get another sort of job – Well I’d been qualified for commercial work and business and I was assigned to Sleemans in Longbrook Terrace. And there I was put out on the airport, in charge of barrack damages on the Exeter Airport. During the war when you were single and you had no dependents and anything cropped up, any special job, you would be assigned to that job. You see, you had to go where you were sent. And I worked out on the airport on barrack damages for Sleemans until D-Day. Sleemans laid the cats eyes on the runways”

She also worked part-time at the Black Horse pub on Longbrook Street and lived nearby, on Poltimore Square, where the John Lewis car park is now. From the

Spring of 1942, American troops were stationed in Exeter, with the White and Black troops segregated, as they were elsewhere in the country.

“Then what happened was the Yanks came over. Now the white Yanks were like the Sidwell Street end, the top end of the city... they were billeted with people... but the black Yanks were billeted St. Thomas area. They were billeted out that side; they weren’t allowed over the bridge, the whites weren’t allowed... so of course, I mean, me being...of...of ethnic minority do you call it? My father was Jamaican, my mother was Cornish, so I lived in Longbrook Street in Poltimore Square... And this happened while I was working on Exeter Airport, towards the end... ‘cause that’s when the Yanks came in towards the end more or less, didn’t they? And one night, I was out because the next door neighbour where I lived, her husband was in Italy, he was a soldier in Italy and she was having a baby, and the baby decided to come; in the night, you know, early evening like, and I think I’d been on a day shift, and I know I was in pyjamas and dressing gown... we didn’t have a phone in those days, they weren’t so popular then, and the phone box was at the top of Longbrook Street. So, she called me, I lived with her Nan, Nanny there, in Poltimore Square, and she called to me, and said “Oh can you go up and ring for the ambulance, can you ring the nurses for me, or the hospital?” I said “Yes”. She gave me the number and I went up to the top of Longbrook Street, you know, where there was a phone box, and I called the hospital. It was on the way back, and four white Americans were there, and they chased me, you see. Now, I mean, they were laughing and ... they chased me back home, I went home, and I locked the door... because I’d brought home some work to do from the airport, some books I was doing, and I had them all spread out on the table there doing them, and they broke down the door. But we had a little backyard there in Poltimore Square, how I got [up] I don’t know, but I jumped up; there was a wall on the top but I jumped up on the wall, and I ran up two doors. There was... Mr. Sam Clapp... he was in the Fire Service up in Howell Road..., he was you know, a big bloke, and I called to him. It was 2 or 3 doors up, and I ran up, and he said “jump down, I’ll catch you” you know, I dithered and dithered but I heard these men coming after me , you see, so then I did jump, and he caught me and it was alright. It was alright, so he more or less, saved my life, because if they were only playing, they wouldn’t have broken down the door. They would have just banged on the door, perhaps, to frighten me, then ran away. But I knew that something would happen. I knew that something would happen”.

Mrs Hendy was also involved in the Exeter Blitz. The following incident was probably in 1942.

“Well, after that we had the Blitz on the city you know? So, I mean, we were all busy there working you know, helping people in shelters and

everything like that. And, I mean, the days were... were terrible. But, I was in... [fire-watching], where you went out and looked around to see if there was any fire bombs and all that lark. And my patch was Longbrook Street up to York Road, round the York Road to Longbrook Street again, and Queens Crescent... there was a soldier that got trapped in St Sidwell's churchyard, I heard him calling and that for help, but I couldn't pull him out, I tried to pull him out but I couldn't pull him out, and I went to the ARP, Mr Dalyall he was called. And we got a couple of men together and we went and got him out, but he died, the soldier died. He had a big tombstone stuck in his back, you see, I couldn't move the tombstone, it was too much you see, so, that was that."

Mrs Hendy recalled D-Day at the airport.

"D-day came... the Americans and the Polish airmen were out there then. And it was a lovely sight on D-day morning – it was a lovely morning, quite bright, sunny and I didn't even hear them coming in or anything, but on that morning the whole airport was covered with gliders. And the gliders, they were bright yellow, with black stripes on the wings and it looked like a whole field, you know, magnified, of bees and wasps – it was a lovely sight, but of course you couldn't take no photos in those days could you, and, they took off gradually, one-by-one.

It was a marvellous experience ... the plane itself would fly around the airport, and it would have a long nylon rope with a big hook attached to the bottom, and the glider would be on the ground with the big loop on the top... The plane would fly over, drop this rope, because the rope was attached to the plane and pick up the aircraft. It was a marvellous thing...to see how it was all done, all done with precision. And they would bring the glider up, fly around, and then they would drop the rope in this special place which was all cordoned off like, and they would drop that rope down there and carry on. It was a lovely sight – I'll never forget that".

After D-Day, Mrs Hendy worked for Devon County Council, taking "the place of a young man that lived at Exminster. He went in the Navy... It was all men in the Council, as usual I guess...they didn't think a woman could do the job perhaps".

Mrs Hendy then went to work for the County Council, and then to London, where she worked for the Council in Bow. She returned to Exeter after VE Day (May 8<sup>th</sup> 1945).

"Well, as I said there was always plenty of work about and that. So I worked in a little café on Exe Bridge... I got the job of Supervisor. I met quite a bit of racial contention there, because there was one waitress, I think she was much against coloured people as we had some Americans come in there one day, and they said to her "You don't take orders from a

black person, do you?" And she said "Well, I've got to haven't I? It's my job". I didn't last in that job very long, because I wouldn't have that".

Soon afterwards she met her husband Arthur Hendy "an Exeter boy" who was White. Arthur had been in the Desert Rats in the war, and had lost some fingers when his Jeep went over a land mine. He was a widower with five children. They married in 1948 and applied for a council house.

"In those days, a Mr. Parrot, I remember his name, Mr. Parrot, run the City Council... And you had to take your marriage certificate with a pound for the fee, that's right you had to pay the pound to him and then you'd have the house."

They moved into 149 Briar Crescent in Wonford, where she lived for the next 52 years. There Mrs Hendy had 7 children, all premature, all at home, and six survived. They all attended Bradley Rowe Primary, and the girls went to Priory Secondary (now Isca) and the boys to Vincent Thompson (now St Peters).

Her daughter Sue says they liked living in Wonford, despite its reputation as a rough area "the people we met were really lovely, you could leave your doors open, we never had any problems".

Sue recalls

"Houses in Burnthouse Lane had a small kitchen and a front room... my dad would be in the front room in his chair – nobody sat in that chair. There was a table with stools in the kitchen... we all sat close together. We all mucked in, slept top and tail. There were 3 bedrooms, girls in one, boys in the other... I remember that like yesterday... The gardens were always large... we kept mice and rabbits"

Sue also recalled that they never had any problems with racism, and there was no sense of Mrs Hendy being an outsider "she was very lucky that people accepted her...and accepted us for who we are" which she thinks was unusual for those days. Her daughter however (Mrs Hendy's grand-daughter) was regularly bullied by some boys from Vincent Thompson school in the 1970s.

Sue described Mrs Hendy as a very good mother who knew how to bring up children. "I'm not saying she was strict, but if she said something, that something went... they didn't have to shout, we knew our place"

Her mother was generous – Sue said that she "never had nothing for herself, always kept us together... we couldn't have asked for better". And Mrs Hendy herself recalled:

"If anybody wanted anything, I helped. I'd make wedding dresses, done sewing, knitting, wedding cakes, and all sorts of cooking. I've done it to

help people that wanted it. Birthday cakes, the lot. You know, I've been quite happy to do it. I've been quite happy to help anybody that wanted anything done".

She said that the children were always healthy

"because I always did my own cooking. Always had everything fresh. My husband kept a garden in vegetables so that I could... at the time I used to freeze them, you know, we used to have the cabbage, the beans, the peas, everything, we would have in the garden".

Her husband loved fishing

"he used to go to Exmouth fishing and he used to say "I'll bring home fish for dinner"... He'd say you get the chips ready and I'll be home such and such a time and I'd have all the chips done, and he'd come home – no fish! But he was relaxed... I was what they call a fishing widow. .. But he would not take the two boys fishing, until they'd passed and got their certificate for swimming. And one day...he'd had an accident, and he had his leg in plaster and he was down Salmon Pool Lane fishing with the boys one day, and there was other children come around, and one boy fell in the river, and my husband went in and saved him. He jumped in, although he had this [plaster] on his leg"

Mrs Hendy was a founder member of the Wonford luncheon club

"Well about 19 years ago [1981] Mrs. Radford started a luncheon club at Bradley Rowe School. And now, oh we were quite a nice little group that went up there. We were all elderly, and we were all, they were all more or less alone, you know.

"We have lunch, a sweet, cup of tea and, then we have little talks together, because we're all mostly of the same age, so we can talk, you know, about all the various things that we do. And of course, me being a Cornish girl, my ideas are sometimes quite different; basically we were all brought up the same, but there's still a great difference in the way different counties live".

In 1992, the Express & Echo ran a feature story about her called 'Home sweet home: Dot wouldn't swop Briar Crescent for anywhere else", with a lovely photo of Mrs Hendy and her grandson Tommy.

After 2000, Mrs Hendy moved into a bungalow near Arthur Roberts Home. One night Sue got a phone call from a neighbour at half past eleven, to say that her 80-year old mother was outside the house, "sat outside with this lady who wasn't feeling very well". Even in her eighties, she was generous and neighbourly.

Mrs Hendy died in Whipton hospital on 16<sup>th</sup> June 2002, 4 days after her 85<sup>th</sup> birthday. Her funeral at the crematorium was packed, she was well liked and respected in Wonford.

She was an extraordinary, ordinary woman.

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*I am grateful to Sue Evens, Mrs Hendy's daughter, and to Councillor Olwen Foggin for their help. Olwen Foggin interviewed Mrs Hendy in 1999 or 2000 for an exhibition on the history of Wonford. She provided us with the tape and the transcript.*