

**MANX HERITAGE FOUNDATION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPT**

‘TIME TO REMEMBER’

Interviewee(s): Vivien Allen

Date of birth: 15th December 1925

Place of birth:

Interviewer(s): David Callister

Recorded by: David Callister

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Topics: World famous author and journalist
Early childhood memories
Memories of WWII
Evacuation to grandparents in Devon
The London Blitz
Air raid shelters
Father’s involvement in designing search light apparatus
Father gassed during WWI
Memories of VE Day celebrations
The Wrens

Vivien Allen - VA
David Callister - DC

DC Children in British cities, London in particular, were evacuated to the country for safety. Vivien Allen, a long-time resident in the Isle of Man, is now a world famous author whose books include ‘Kruger’s Petoria,’ ‘Hall Caine,’ ‘Lady Trader’ and ‘Dear Mr Rosetti.’ She had reached her teenage years when the Second World War began.

VA I’d just started at boarding school down on the South coast, and it made a lot of difference with – one thing was the sweet rationing. And there’s a house-mistress had a big jar of boiled sweets and at the end of lunch every day we filed past and you were allowed to take out two. And during the summer holidays they’d built air raid trenches and we were drilled and drilled and drilled in staggering out of bed, getting our gas masks, putting on our thick sports sweaters, and our school cloaks, and then we had to file down, ‘Don’t run girls!’ and go into our own bit of the trenches, and the house staff come round and check their own groups. And then, after a bit, ‘Alright,’ we were sent back – that was just a practise. And then one night we were kept sitting there an awful long time, and we were beginning to doze off, and then the staff came round with those big jars of sweets ...

DC Hmmm.

VA ... and I realised it’s a real air raid this time – we’re down here for good. And we were down there for about two or three hours ...

DC Yes.

VA ... and then, when the Germans were going through – at the time of Dunkirk, we saw the little boats coming back to Brighton pier. Of course, we didn’t realise what was going on, but at night, if – after lights out – we twitched the blackout aside, we could see the guns flashing across the channel.

DC Yes. Were you evacuated then, at any point?

VA Yes. At the end of that – well, before the end of that term, the government closed all the schools on the South coast, and we were all sent home. Well, my home was in London, so I was sent back to my grandparents in Devon. And the school had about six weeks to find somewhere for us all to go. And we went to Keswick ...

DC Right.

VA When we all ...

DC In the Lake District?

VA In the Lake District. And we all met in Keswick in the beginning of September 1940, after an amazing train journey up from London. Skirting all the main towns to be safe ...

DC Hmm.

VA ... because it was just at the start of the London blitz. I was in London for the first night of the blitz, and we were up there in Keswick and, because my home was in London and it was a very awkward journey down to Devon, I and quite a lot of my friends and quite a lot of the staff spent Christmas at school. I didn't go home again until Easter and see my parents for six months.

DC Yes, right. Where did you stay in Keswick, then?

VA Well, the main part, the upper school, we had *The Keswick Hotel*, the big hotel by the station ...

DC Hmm.

VA ... and then there was a smaller hotel called *Milfield* that the junior house had, and also, I think it was a B&B called *Shulicrow* – I had my – I learnt to bake bread there (*laughter*) in the domestic science class in the first year sixth. We had to cook meals for the – and serve them to some of the staff, which was fairly terrifying. (*laughter*)

DC So this was relative luxury for you, was it?

VA Well, yes it was, I mean, we had a fairly comfortable war, but I left April 1943 and re-joined my parents in London and it was the end of the proper aeroplane air raids ...

DC Hmm.

VA ... and the – we used to go down when the sirens went. There were shelters – trenches dug under the park. And it was just opposite the next block up, we just crossed the road, walk a block and go down some steps underground ...

DC Right.

VA ... and we used – there was search light battery in Battersea Park, and we used to see them waving about, and just occasionally, ‘Ooh look, they’ve found one!’ You’d see this little silver thing. And one night, we were going down to the shelters, and I thought, ‘Where’s the search lights? No search lights on.’ And then they all came on at once in a cone, and there was a plane, in the top. I said to my father, ‘However did they do that?!’ He said, ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘clever trick, isn’t it?’ What he couldn’t tell until after the war was, that he’d designed the apparatus that did it.

DC Oh, really, yes? Now you mentioned the blitz earlier, or seeing the early part of the blitz ...

VA Well, just the first night ...

DC What do you remember of that?

VA Well, standing on the balcony of the flat with my parents and looking away to the East, and the whole of the Eastern sky was scarlet, and we could hear the crump of bombs, and my father saying, ‘They’re trying to starve us out. They are bombing the docks.’

DC Hmm. So you will remember – you’ll have fairly vivid memories of VE Day, I suppose, would you?

VA Oh yes, very particularly. It was great fun. My father had been invalided out of the Navy – he got gassed in the First World War, and it affected his lungs, and that night he was ill in bed. And he couldn’t – we wanted to go up West, and of course, he couldn’t escort us, but my brother was then, I think, about 14½, and – or just coming up 15, so, in the end, my father gave his permission for my brother to escort me and my mother ...

DC You were older than him, of course, weren’t you?

VA Yes, I was older than him, but he was the *boy*, you see, had to look after his sister, protect her virtue! (*laughter*)

DC (*laughter*) Ah yes.

VA And my mother made us sandwiches – well, you wouldn't remember gas mask cases, would you?

DC Oh yes, I do.

VA We'd thrown our gas masks in the dustbin, and we packed our gas mask cases with our sandwiches ... (*laughter*)

DC (*laughter*) I see, yes ...

VA ... and we caught the bus up West, and we went to Whitehall first, to Downing Street. Well, of course, in those days there were no gates. You could walk right through Downing Street and there was a place out the end, and I think you came out in Horse Guards Parade.

DC Hmmm.

VA And tourists used to be posing with the policemen in front of number ten – the absolute scorn of us Londoners – and we got to the end of Downing Street, and there were two or three policemen who said, 'No, we can't have such a big crowd in here,' 'cos the whole street was full of people. They said, 'Mr Churchill's gone to the Treasury, you'll see him there.' Which, of course, was just around the corner, and we got there just as Winny came out on the balcony with the Treasurer, and we all cheered and shouted and he went in again. And we went up to Leicester Square with most of the rest of the crowd – Trafalgar Square at the top, there ...

DC Oh yes, oh yes ...

VA ... and joined in the general sort of singing and dancing, and we joined a Conga, led by a RAF Flight Lieutenant round the base of Nelson's Column. And there was a sailor ... a soldier ready to grab me round the waist and my brother wasn't having that – he pushed him out of the way (*laughter*) – he was looking after his

sister. And from there we went – the crowd all moved up the Mall to Buckingham Palace, to see the King and Queen.

DC Yes, you wouldn't get near it, would you?

VA No – well, we got as far as just beside the fountains, you know, where the statue of Queen Victoria is, we were just on the right. And of course, in that dense crowd, I mean, I wasn't any taller then than I am now – barely five foot – so I couldn't see a thing, and there were two huge American sailors in front of us, and my brother said, 'Oh, excuse me, could you move a little, my sister can't see anything' ...

DC Yes?

VA ... and one of them looked round and said, 'oh, sure.' And he picked me up and sat me on his shoulders (*laughter*) holding my ankles and said, 'Are you alright up there?' Well, of course, I had a bandstand view.

DC Right, of course.

VA But I'll never forget the look on baby brother's face – he obviously was wondering whether his father would reckon that this was taking care of his sister! (*laughter*) And then the King and Queen came out with the princesses, then they came out once more with Winston, and then by themselves without anybody else. And we thought, well, that's the end of the show, so it started breaking up. And it was being whispered round the crowd, 'The princesses have come out.' Princess Elizabeth had been in her army uniform – which I envied her.

DC Yes.

VA She hadn't been found C3. I volunteered for the Wrens ...

DC Oh yes – you couldn't get in on health grounds ...

VA No, well, I'd fallen off my pony a couple of years before, and unfortunately the Wren's doctor spotted it. She said, 'Turn your back, bend down and touch your toes.' And I hadn't been able to do that for a couple of years. (*laughter*) So I

was ignominiously told I was C3 – Not Fit for Service.

DC So the two princesses actually came out into the crowd, then?

VA They did. But Princess Elizabeth changed out of her uniform, and they came out – in those days we used to wear those headscarves tied under our chins – they came out with scarves with a couple of guards officers.

DC Yes.

VA And we didn't see them – we didn't spot them, but we did hear afterwards that there was – they had come out.

DC Yes.

VA But we saw a bonfire in St James Park, so we went to see what this was. And people were throwing the park furniture on a bonfire. And my brother was rather shocked by this. Anyhow, I found a spare chair, (*laughter*) so I heaved a park chair on the bonfire, and in a long and relatively misspent life I think it's the only time I've indulged in vandalism! (*laughter*)

DC You enjoyed it, did you? (*laughter*)

VA Yes!!! It went up beautifully. (*laughter*)

DC There'd be a lot of singing going on during this time, of course?

VA Oh yes – particularly when we got to Piccadilly Circus. We went – got through by St James Palace and made our way up to Piccadilly Circus, where there was a huge crowd, and, I mean, we were opposite the – it's *The Hippodrome*, that theatre there, isn't it? We were absolutely stuck – we couldn't move. There was song during the war, 'I'm going to get lit-up when the lights go on in London'. I think it was written by Hubert Gregg ...

DC Yes.

VA ... and it was sung by Zoe Gale, and search lights came on, on the balcony. This was still the blackout – there weren't any lights on, none of those wonderful

neon signs or anything – and out she came in her costume with her top hat and fishnet tights and a bottle of champagne and a glass (*laughter*) and she sang this song. And of course we all knew it and the whole crowd joined in ...

DC Of course, yes.

VA ... and then, when she finished, the lights came. All the neon signs and everything, it was heart-stopping ...

DC Oh, right.

VA ... because we'd had the blackout since September 1939 ...

DC Yes, right.

VA ... and the lights went up in London ...

DC So Hubert Gregg was right, then, the lights would go on and ...

VA Well, I think they timed it, and this was all planned as part of the celebrations.

DC Can you remember the song now?

VA Well, I couldn't sing it, but I do remember it. (*laughter*)

DC Well, go on ... 'I'm going to get lit-up,' is it?

VA 'When the lights go up in London. But I'm going to get lit up' ...

DC 'Like I never was before.'

VA 'Never was before,' yes.

[Recording of song, 'I'm going to get lit-up when the lights go on in London']

DC Those reminiscences from Vivien Allen take us to the end of the present series.

END OF INTERVIEW