

Frizzells at Staines, 1939 – 1946

The City of London-based firm of insurance brokers Norman Frizzell & Partners Ltd was evacuated to Staines upon the outbreak of the Second World War. The company occupied buildings at the former Ellerslie School for girls, and private houses St Ronan's and Knowle Lodge, all in Kingston Road, for a period of over six years. My father Leslie Jagers had joined the company in 1933 and with the evacuation moved with his new wife Connie from their childhood home of Walthamstow to Staines, initially taking a flat above a haberdashery shop in the Broadway, then after a few months moving to 20 Fenton Avenue, where they were to stay until 1970. During the 1970's my father was asked by his senior management to compile a pre-war and wartime history of Frizzells and solicited contributions from long-serving employees known to him. This then is the story of Frizzells at Staines during the war years, as told by its employees.....

Len Fontana (who joined the company aged 15 in 1938):-

My ambition was to sit at the (Lloyds) box and tell people what they could do with their rubbish; but before my ambition could be achieved war was declared with Germany in 1939 and I was packed off to Frizzells' office at Staines together with approximately thirty young males and various seniors under the protection and guidance of Harry Steele, George Tennant and Percy Scales. The hostel and business premises was called Ellerslie School and thanks to various bomb scares in London and elsewhere a further two Victorian houses were also leased. For the time being we were working and sleeping at Ellerslie so one can imagine bleary-eyed youths of 16 to 18 falling out of bed into work, after having a quick breakfast under the control of a local fuehrer called Mrs. Mansfield who had a healthy allowance from the company to feed us boys and be our mother-guardian. In addition to the fact that rationing had started the quality and quantity of food was kept to the minimum to eke out the small pittance she was allowed (a lot being kept for herself) - hence one of our main war cries – “no sauce with baked beans”.

The accommodation for sleeping was rather primitive and the antics to which young healthy males got up to can be imagined. Many were the pillow fights and raiding of each other's bedrooms necessitating a harassed Harry Steele using his authority to try to get the boys asleep. Unfortunately, in one of these escapades wherein each bedroom was attacking the other, Mr. Steele came up the stairs from his bedroom in time to receive the full brunt of the articles being thrown. The main objectives of these missiles were the large stuffed ducks left by the previous occupants, thrown by possibly the biggest reprobate of all, young Fontana. That young upstart found himself allocated to fire picket duty with none other than Harry Steele and Reggie Davis, the Fire Manager at the time. Reggie slept all night and Harry listened to every news item muttering in clear Scots brogue "the yellow bastards" referring, of course, to the Japanese.

Mrs. Aiken used to comfort us in sickness and in health but I think most of the sickness was caused by the local 'dos' but of course we did not enlighten her too much on that point, for dear old Wally Aiken would have used his main catch phrase bandied around by we boys namely, "I can't understand it".

Leslie Jagers

Evacuation to Staines at the outbreak of war in 1939 meant that all social life centred on “the Club”, which was fortunate to obtain the use of a hall adjoining the Station Hotel. Many were the pints consumed in giving a right royal send off to the chaps who one after another were called up for the Forces. The send off for “Wilkie” (John Wilkins) was a memorable occasion with him vigorously asserting to the “bitter”end that he was completely sober, it was just that his legs refused to support him.

Dances were held at regular intervals and all but the first were highly successful. For our first effort we decided to hire a temperance hall and to “dragoon” someone to act as M.C. Two greater mistakes could not have been made; no-one came until after the pubs closed at

10 p.m. and by then the M.C. had consumed so much "Dutch Courage" that it took six of us to get him off the premises and then not until he had taken on and delivered knock out punches to a number of fairly ornate lighting fittings. The quantity of drink consumed before his arrival seemed to have given him a Don Quixote fixation.

One evening the hut erected in the grounds of Ellerslie School and used by the "Scheme Motor Department" was completely destroyed by incendiary bombs. Later the same night a very large bomb fell in the front garden of our other accommodation at Knowle Lodge, but failed to explode. All the available male staff were called out (it was a Sunday morning) to move all records, furniture, etc. to a place of safety whilst the police and others helped residents and families living nearby to evacuate their homes. When the bomb finally exploded a couple of days later the blast travelled in a completely different direction to that anticipated, doing a considerable amount of damage to the Broadway shops and flats above, all some distance from where the bomb fell, whilst Knowle Lodge and nearby properties were virtually unscathed. What did we do? We moved everything back and didn't even ask for overtime. I don't think the very real danger present all the time we were clearing the building entered anyone's head and we didn't only move records - everything that could be moved was taken out. We couldn't afford to lose any more furniture after losing all that in the hut. Incidentally, the Sports Club's proudest possession, its table tennis table, suffered in this raid, one half of which was being used as a sorting table in the Scheme dept. being destroyed in the fire.

W. Reid (who had started with the company in 1936)

I soon learned that Mr. Frizzell and Mr. Steele, although hardheaded businessmen were both family men and interested in the family affairs of their staff. My daughter still remembers that a few years later, when we were exiled in Staines, my wife would bring her to St. Ronan's on summer evenings when Mr. Steele, Reggie Davis and I were doing our stint of fire-watching. Mr. Steele would pull grass and then hold my daughter up so that she could feed the cows on the other side of the fence.

If only we had kept a diary during the war years at Staines it would now make interesting and, in the main, amusing reading. To put events into anything like chronological order would not be possible now.

One of the first "happenings" was THE SHED. This was a large wooden hut built on the lawn at Ellerslie (ex School for Girls, but now temporary offices for N.F.& P.) It held twenty desks and accommodated the Motor Department, Scheme and non-scheme. After the first heavy rainfall the door swelled to such an extent that the man who erected it had to come and trim the door down on all four sides so that it could be closed. After a day or two of dry weather another visit was made to build the door up again. This process of "trimming" and "building" was continuous until, in the early days of the first blitz on London, the Germans scored a direct hit with an oil bomb. The shed and everything contained therein, including our alphabetical policyholder index, was a complete write-off. "Loss of index" and inability to replace it was a face-saver for some years afterwards.

That was an historic night for Frizzells. We had taken over the ground floor of Knowle Lodge, a large private house further up Kingston Road, and this housed the Accounts Department. Having been informed of the oil bomb at Ellerslie, John Harding set out from his digs to find out what was happening, but was stopped by a police barrier across Kingston Road as a time bomb had dropped into the back garden of Knowle Lodge.

The unexploded bomb at Knowle Lodge created a problem, as loss of the accounts records which were kept there would have been a serious matter. Volunteers were called for to bring out as many of the important books as we could and, whilst the police could not stop us from rescuing our property, they could, and did, make the operation very difficult. We had borrowed two small wheelbarrows from a local builder, one with heavy metal wheels and one with rubber tyres. We were stopped from using the one with metal wheels in case the vibration set off the mechanism of the bomb. In addition two barriers were erected across the road, which had to be removed and replaced each time we went through them. Although it was only about 300 yards from Knowle Lodge to Ellerslie, working

under these conditions it took us nearly all day to transfer the books. A few days later, after the bomb had been removed, they all had to go back.

It was about this time that it was decided to form our own A.R.P. squad to do what we could to protect our property. The C.O. was Mr. Allinson, who was one of the tallest and biggest men in the office. He was authorized to buy twelve boiler suits and steel helmets: this he did - all to fit him!

Having to rely on whatever local labour was available, we met many characters' during our sojourn in Staines, and all sorts of incidents occurred.

There was the young lady who, because of her unreliability, had to be taken off the firm's fire-watching rota and was attached by the Council to our local A.R.P. squad. On her first night of official duty she reported Frizzells for having an inefficient blackout. Mr. Steele happened to be on fire-watching duty that night.

We had a spell of petty pilfering, mainly from ladies' handbags, which were left lying about. A temporary member of the staff said he knew the local police very well and offered to seek advice from them. This he did and returned with a packet of powder, which would stain the fingers of anybody who touched it. A "plant" of a handbag with a pound note inside was arranged and although the 'plant' was never touched the pilfering stopped. We subsequently learned that the individual was known to the police because of a conviction for embezzlement. He left us because of irregularities in cash he had received from clients and the last we heard of him was a further conviction for embezzlement.

The husband of the woman in charge of the Post section was a member of the Fire Brigade and during his off-duty periods was employed by us as an odd job man. His procedure was to sign on and off daily and he was paid for the number of hours as recorded in his book. Having three separate buildings to look after he was never an easy man to find in a hurry and he took advantage of this by taking on work, such as decorating or gardening, for members of the staff living in the vicinity of the offices. His wife always knew where to find him if necessary. Another source of income to him was the sale of wooden toys, which he had made himself, to the staff, and at least one director. The wood he got by breaking up office furniture which was not in use. The two of them were quite happy to spend the whole of their Christmas holiday, with their family, in the office and so relieve the rest of the staff from fire-watching duty. In addition to the substantial allowances they received a payment made to them from the staff's own "Firewatchers Comfort Fund". They were very upset when this payment appeared in the Fund accounts as "a gratuity". According to the notice on the Council's refuse cart a gratuity was something which you must not give to the dustman.

Following the loss of the Shed by enemy action Mr. Allinson wrote to the Town Clerk (who was also Chief A.R.P. Officer) complaining that the fire brigade was late arriving and that but for their inefficiency our loss would not have been so great. Nothing further was heard of the complaint, but within a short space of time the premises were inspected by the Fire Prevention Officer, who insisted on many changes, including the removal from the attic of a stack of stationery that we had been able to build up, and which we estimated would last us for at least a year.

Mr. Steele, Reggie Davis and I did fire watching together for some months. R.W.D. was insistent that it was impossible for him to sleep anywhere but in his own bed and therefore W.H.S. and I could sleep undisturbed unless there was an air raid warning. This was very nice for us, until I was awakened one night by W.H.S. calling out "Is that the All Clear?" Reggie was sound asleep and had no idea at what time the warning had been sounded. Thereafter we had to take our turn on watch.

For the purpose of dealing with incendiary bombs, sand bags, spades, stirrup pumps and hoses were placed at various points in and around the building. These were supposed to be checked each night by the fire-watching team and the logbook signed to confirm that they were in the right places and serviceable. The logbook was regularly signed, but one evening, apparently having nothing better to do, W.H.S. suggested we made a proper check. Spades were completely missing (having, we assumed, been borrowed by members of the staff for home gardening); the sand bags looked alright, but when touched the bags disintegrated; on testing a hose which was coiled up in a round banana crate we produced a fountain display as

good as Trafalgar Square. It was fortunate that we were never called upon to use our own defences.

It was whilst I had the job of organizing the firewatchers rota that I learned something of the bureaucracy in small towns such as Staines. The Town Clerk was the leading Solicitor in the town, and also Lord of the Manor. At the outbreak of the War he took unto himself the job as Senior Officer of all the local emergency organizations - Fuel Control, Food Control, Air Raid Precautions, etc. and finished up with a different job for each day of the week. When I wrote to the Deputy A.R.P. Officer for some information he 'phoned and asked me to call at his office, which I did and got the information I wanted. The Deputy A.R.P. Officer then explained why he did not want to reply in writing. He had no authority to give me a written reply without first sending a memo to the Senior A.R.P.O. He in turn would have to write to the Town Clerk. Replies would then be sent back down the line. As the Senior A.R.P.O. and Town Clerk could only deal with the matter on the appropriate day in office, there could be some delay before the Deputy A.R.P.O. could write to me, particularly if a letter could not be dictated and signed on the same day.

The Captain of the Fire Brigade succeeded his father, who had had the job because he had the contract to supply and maintain the fire engine. They decided who could, or could not, join the brigade.

Percy L. Scales

With the onset of war it was necessary to safeguard the business by moving out of London, leaving only a small staff to maintain an office in the City. An empty school building in Staines was taken over and Frizzells moved in on 26th August 1939. Some employees who were members of the Territorial Army were called up for service almost immediately, but most of the staff moved to Staines and it was a major operation getting accommodation for them. Ellerslie School had been left fully furnished, and there were a number of bedrooms in which many of the junior staff were accommodated. I remember my first evening at the school, having a meal in the dining room. Mr. Steele and John Harding sat at one end of the table, and George Tennant and myself at the other end. About three boys sat either side. It seemed more like a school party.

In due course no one lived-in, the rooms were emptied and used entirely as offices. Even so there was not enough room and two additional offices were opened at "St. Ronan's" and "Knowle Lodge" respectively in Kingston Road.

Frizzells had its own "Home-Guard" unit under the command of J. D. Allinson, who did the job with vigour and efficiency. In the early days of its existence the unit would be working, in uniform, and when the air-raid siren sounded they would dash into the road with their rifles and stop the traffic. They were looking for German paratroops, but they had no ammunition or bayonets. I have a distinct recollection of Doug Bigham standing in front of a lorry with a rifle at the ready whilst Allinson questioned the driver. This practice had to stop, the police didn't like it. Neither did the motorists.

When Allinson did receive a supply of ammunition he not only got the men on shooting practice, but also invited the ladies to join in, and some of them did rifle shooting under his tuition, I believe. In any case the practice didn't last, and the ammunition was reserved for the Germans.

We were short of office space, so two very large wooden huts were erected in the grounds of Ellerslie School for the use of the Motor Department under Tom Keating's management. The Motor slips and indices were kept in the huts, which each housed four or five clerks. One weekend enemy planes in passing over Staines to raid London, as usual, dropped a large incendiary bomb on the huts, which were completely burnt out. B. Stapley was on fire-watch and he could do nothing effective with only a stirrup-pump and buckets of water. All the Motor records were destroyed, except for some few charred remains, after being moved from London for safety. It was a disaster, and yet somehow the Motor Department managed to carry on.

Men from our staff were being called up from time-to-time, and we had to replace them by employing local women. The male staff was so depleted that finally there were only the following so far as I remember, apart from a few boys, in Staines offices

W. H. Steele)
A. G. Askew) Directors
A.J. Harding)
W. Aiken)

E. J. Adams	W. Reid	G.E. Tennant
J. H. Reiff	G.V. Dunster	W. Carruthers
P. L. Scales	F. Stapley	

I think the female staff was about 50 including some wives of employees:

Mrs. W. Aiken	Mrs. W. Davis	Mrs. D. M. Harding
Mrs. C. Jaggars	Mrs. M. P. Scales	Mrs. W. Tennant
Mrs. E. Ward		

Mr. T. N. Frizzell remained in London as Lloyd's continued its activities there. Our broker, G. E. Tennant, travelled daily to the City with risks to be underwritten. Papers, files etc., were transported between Staines and London by a daily messenger service. W. Carruthers was the Chief messenger, and R. Varndell assisted. No matter the difficulties of railway travel, with disruptions caused by bombing, George Tennant and messengers always managed to carry on, cheerfully. It was particularly hazardous in the flying-bomb period. I recall talking by telephone to Stanley Salter, in London, when suddenly he asked me to hang-on for a moment as a flying bomb was droning overhead. He would duck under the desk for a moment.

Business was brisk and a lot of late work was done by some of the Staines staff. Sometimes Percy Young, Johnny Reiff, George Annand and others would work until about 8. 00 p.m. then go to the Railway Tavern for refreshment, returning in good spirits (distilled and convivial) to the office about 10.00 p.m. to work on until midnight.

All three offices in Staines were damaged one night when a flying bomb dived on a house in Kingston Road; had it landed on the opposite side of the road Ellerslie School might have been destroyed. The front of the school was scarred by bomb-splinters, and the blast shattered all windows in that area. The staff spent most of the day clearing away glass, plaster and other rubble. Prior to that an unexploded bomb was found behind Knowle Lodge which housed the Secretarial and main accounts sections. A. J. Harding, E. J. Adams and myself moved, by a builder's handcart, all minute books, ledgers and private files to Ellerslie, before the bomb disposal team got to work.

A large air-raid shelter was built behind Ellerslie School, for the staff and the public. Normally only our firewatchers used it at night; it was eventually thought unnecessary to take cover for daylight alerts.

At Knowle Lodge and the other offices, when the alert sounded an officer junior armed with a whistle patrolled outside, watching for enemy planes. If he gave an alarm we should carry on working - the shelter was too far away in any case. Staines being a "safe" area got plenty of raid alerts but, fortunately, very few bombs.

With the end of the war Frizzells prepared to return to London. With the exception of the Scheme Motor Department and Scheme Accounts Department the Staines staff moved in September 1945 to No. 10 Drapers Gardens, Throgmorton Avenue. A. G. Askew was left in charge of Staines offices, W. D. Reid managing the Motor Department and myself in charge of the Accounts Department. We continued in peaceful tranquility at Staines for nine months. The French window of my room opened onto a large garden which was graced, in the lunchtime, by the ladies reclining in deck chairs or on the lawn, in the spring. I had a fairly easy time as much of my work had been transferred to London. This was Utopia. But not for long. In June 1946 the Company opened another London office, at London House, New London Street, and the Staines offices were finally closed on 23rd June 1946.

L.A. Jaggars had started an organized sports club for the staff in London and thanks to his ability and enthusiasm this thrived during the 1930's, with a keen interest in cricket, football and table-tennis. With the war, and Leslie Jaggars "called up" the Sports Club

stagnated and our once cherished tennis-table became a dining-table in the kitchen at St Ronan's office.

J. C Tennant

The threat of Great Britain becoming involved in a war against Germany was apparent throughout 1939 and the last week of August 1939 was a time of great activity as war appeared imminent. A staff meeting was held on the Friday afternoon when advice was given that if war was declared on the following morning staff were to evacuate to Staines, where accommodation was available at Ellerslie, an ex-private school situated in Kingston Road. A skeleton staff was to remain in London. Quite a number of staff would not be available at Staines or London as they were liable to immediate call up.

The evacuation to Staines went well and most of the staff arrived at Ellerslie at the time required. For some days practically all slept on blankets supplied. Further premises became available at Knowle Lodge, a former residence situated about 200 yards from our other premises in Kingston Road but on the other side of the road. The use of another private house situated two doors from Ellerslie was also obtained. Local people obtained employment as catering and cleaning staff. Arrangements for sleeping was restricted to "Ellerslie". Eventually all employees who were not called up found lodgings with local families. Two other firms of Lloyd's Brokers had also migrated to Staines namely C.C. Heath & Co. Ltd and Robert Crawford & Co. Ltd. The former being installed in the Worples Road and the latter in a private house a few doors from our premises in the Kingston Road.

Within a few days of my arrival at Ellerslie I shared a small room with a Director. Some of the lads had procured a large theatrical goose complete with real feathers. Unknown to me this had been placed in the bed of the person with whom I shared the room. When he got into bed and came in contact with the bird the air was blue. I had to stuff a sheet in my mouth to control my laughter.

Many of the lads awaited their call up and consequently obtained whatever enjoyment was available and indulged in various pranks. This attitude was understandable but not all were harmless and one was particularly dangerous. The incident involved fixing the toilet in a lavatory so that when the chain was pulled the whole cistern fell to the ground. Serious personal injuries could have resulted but fortunately the only damage was the breakage of the cistern and pan.

(a page is missing here??)

..... Advantage being taken of the offer staff members returned to Ellerslie about 2pm. and promptly became involved with office work. At about 4pm somebody enquired as to whether anybody would like a cup of tea. It was not the drink anticipated but nevertheless accepted and the passing of time enabled the staff to appreciate the funny side of the matter.

As time passed many of the established staff received their calling papers and were replaced by local labour. From time to time news was received of those on active service and occasionally when leave permitted some paid visits to Staines. The labour situation was difficult inasmuch as choice was very restricted. To approach members of a competitor was not encouraged and school leavers, pensioners, and married women were in demand. It was not easy to dispense with the services of an unsatisfactory employee. If such action was taken and the person duly reported to the Labour Exchange there was a strong possibility that he would be sent back with instructions that he was not to be discharged. Frizzells however did manage to obtain the services of some good local people. In addition help was forthcoming from relatives and friends of the existing staff. Those worthy of mention include the following:-

P. Harvison	was soon called up for service with the R.A.F. but after discharge returned to the firm to contribute many years useful work with the claims section.
-------------	---

Mrs. Reid	worked with the Accounts Dept. during the war. At the end of hostilities she joined the staff returning to London and worked with the Salaries Dept until her retirement.
Miss.J. Henderson	Not only did Jean work full time during the war but she also made an excellent job of running a home and caring for a family. A local butcher admired the effort she made and made sure that her ration was the best available. In case you who read this are not aware of Miss J. Henderson I would hasten to add that you probably know her as Mrs. J. Waters the wife of Johnny Waters at Billericay office. I believe Jean herself is still working at Billericay on a part time basis.
Miss P. Burchett	Like her friend Miss Henderson a hard and willing worker. She still resides in the same house in Staines. She is now married and has 3 children. Her married name is McMahon.
Mrs. E. Cutts	Until a few years ago still did work at home for the Motor Section at City Gate House.
Miss S. Murray	Joined the staff about 1940 and continued working principally as head Policy Typist until she left in 1971. She still lives at the same Staines address but is I believe working for another firm of Insurance Brokers operating at Kingston on Thames.

As from a specified date in 1940 it became necessary for Factories and Offices to have staff on duty at night to deal with incidents arising from incendiary bombs. Later regulations required all medically fit men between the ages of 16 and 60 to be liable for up to 48 hours fire watching per month. It was customary to have at least two persons on duty at all Frizzells premises. On two occasions I operated alone but admit I never felt at ease. Early one evening after office hours I saw a few female staff members operating an experiment with an Ouija Board. With the aid of an upturned glass under the fingers of participants on a polished surface spelling out messages and replying to questions. Suggestions had apparently been made that the school was haunted.

An important feature of work at Staines related to the preparation of slips and documents for submission by the Brokers to Lloyd's Underwriters and Insurance Companies. Messengers at Staines collected such items and conveyed them to the Brokers at the small city office in Gracechurch Street. Later the messengers returned to Staines with information and documents requiring attention there. Sometimes as the result of fog or bomb damage traffic diversions became necessary. The call up of both Mr. J. Handley and Mr. J. Stirratt caused certain alterations to be made. I was asked if I was prepared to resume my previous appointment as Broker. Having agreed to do so I soon obtained the assistance of Mr. R. Varndell a local resident. There was at Lloyd's an air raid shelter of sufficient size to enable underwriting to continue during an air raid. It was only on two occasions that I visited the shelter for brief periods. One afternoon returning from the City I arrived at Waterloo Station at 4pm. As I walked along the platform the sound of a Flying Bomb was heard. As the train was due to leave I got in. Passing through Vauxhall and Clapham I noticed people making for shelter. Shortly afterwards the Doodlebug ceased to follow the path of the railway and fortunately ended up in the Thames.

The most uncomfortable journey I can recollect was a train trip from Waterloo to Staines. The weather was freezing with snow and ice. There was no heating or lighting on the train. The electric unit had the greatest difficulty in picking up current owing to frozen rails. Eventually Twickenham was reached where attachment of a steam locomotive enabled further progress to be made. A journey normally of 30 minutes duration on this occasion took about 4 hours.

With the ending of hostilities it was not long before consideration was given to making arrangements for returning to London

J.G.S. Turner

The shadows of World War II were already darkening our daylight. I remember after returning from a territorial camp in 1938 Mr. Steele asking me whether it was thought there

was going to be a war. I said we had no doubt at all because mere Territorial battalions like ours had been issued with expensive wartime kit (G 10 98). I do not know whether this helped him make a difficult decision but to all events premises were taken in Staines comprising a number of houses and schools to which the staff would be evacuated in the event of declaration of war. It must have been a remarkable piece of administration, but I did not see it as on 2nd. September 1939 a call from the rostrum at Lloyd's issued instructions that all Territorials were to report at once to their Headquarters.