



Her name is Joan and we are still good friends today. We knew the Queen Mother was coming in a helicopter and landing in the part at the back of our house. That was the first of my gaffes. What a chance I thought to sell our poppies what with all those people in one place at one time. We could fill my collecting tin in one go. So Joan and I took the children to await the arrival. Sadly we didn't get to see the Queen Mother as we were too busy chasing poppies around the park as the helicopter's rotor blades had scattered them to the four corners of the field.

Nan had been a sergeant in the ATS and her husband, Ted, always said that in her home life she kept the stripes on her arm.

As the town grew so did the poppy appeal and each new estate had to be covered. There were more and more nights in the cold. The RBL Branch had grown too and we had more members now.

By 1962 I had given birth to a new daughter but the pram came in handy to put the poppy trays on. It was a long time before I eventually learnt to drive but when I did it made life so much easier. The only draw back though was that it made Nan far more ambitious. We had to cover a much wider area but this meant more scope for getting lost and more importantly remembering where we had left the car. I always made sure I made a note of the name of the road. Trouble again as that few people knew the names of the roads themselves and could not help with directions.

When we went out to sell we always made sure that there were four of us. I remember on one estate there was a road with only six houses, three on each side. There was a footpath through to the next road between the houses. On this road I lost the other three members and thought they had lost me. I tried the footpath down the dark alley and came face to face with a couple of young lads who were about six foot tall. Seeing me with my poppy tray and collecting tin prompted a small discussion. One of the boys said that it was illegal to sell poppies except house to house and asked me to confirm this. I pointed out that we had a licence to sell on Remembrance Saturday in the Town Square. They each bought six poppies as they were on their way, they said to a youth club.

The town was constantly changing. After Council houses were being sold and people started to change the appearance of the outside of the houses I remember going up the path of one house and step through the partially built porchway to ring the bell on the original door. As I stepped in the whole framework collapsed like a deck of cards. Another sale lost! Another house had a complete glass frontage with all internal lights blazing. There was a living room to the right and an open staircase on the left. I rang the bell and a man came down the stairs with the shortest

dressng gown on leaving nothing to the imagination. As he caught sight of me he began to pull the robe down at the front making the back even shorter. I beat a hasty retreat without finding out where he kept his poppy money. Some houses have front and back doors at the front side by side. At one of these houses I knocked. No-one answered the front door but from behind me I heard a deep voice say 'Can I help you?' As I turned I still saw nothing but as soon as the lights went on in the kitchen I could see that it was a huge black man. He looked down at my poppy tray and whistled. Five young children came out and dad made them all buy one with their own pocket money.

It seemed like every year the RBL changed things as well. I remember when they first brought in leaves we all sat around wondering how they were attached and we had to do

them all by hand. That year saw our first trip to Richmond. Our branch was bigger by now and we hired a coach to take us to the poppy factory. It is very impressive and moving. I was watching a man who had only one hand and three fingers on the other one. Using a specially adapted machine he was making poppies one by one. One of our members whispered to me 'Should I tell him he is wasting his time as you all undo them again when they get to your house so that you can put the leaves on?' So cruel.

I had quite a few people to help with the leaves. This helped introduce me to people who I would not otherwise have met like a house bound lady who was desperate to help with the appeal. At the other end of the spectrum I was also often called upon to collect Kellie, my grand daughter, from school. Kellie was an old hand by now but her friends that year asked me many questions and it gave me the opportunity to educate them into where the money goes and why. I have often been asked into schools and youth clubs to give talks and have always found them most fascinated and interested. On one visit one little boy said that his grandad had been in the RAF. I told him that my husband had been in the RAF too. The little boy replied 'Oh! Do you think he knew my grandad, his name was Arthur.' Another change was the little snippet on the stick. This was put on to stop the poppy falling out of a button hole or from behind a pin. When they first came out one of my leaf helpers thought his batch was faulty and so cut all 6,000 of them off with a knife. I didn't have the heart to tell him when I went to pick his tray up.

We of course also deliver to factories and places of work. It was at one of these local factories that I came to meet a dear, dear lady. She was a Polish lady with many a story to tell. She has now retired but still insists on having her own tray. I have asked her many times to stay in our area but I know very well that she does not want to. Last year one of her friends had died in Muswell Hill and she went to see him. He had always in life worn a poppy so she pinned hers to his shroud. He was to be buried in Israel.

I took over as Poppy Appeal Organiser in 1986 and almost from day one I had a team of three other people without whom I could not have done the job. There was, of course, my husband Phil but in addition I had Reg and Pauline Steed. Pauline would help me to deliver and collect poppies whilst Reg helped Phil with counting, banking and organising supplies. Reg would also help sell in the Town Centre. He is Vice President of the Branch and so the four of us could count money in my house legally for weeks on end. It was hard work but as a team we got on and always had an enjoyable time.

I met them again that year in the Town Square as they were selling poppies for the Army Cadets.

Once the Town Centre was built with plenty of shops the appeal became very big and we began an operation the Saturday before Remembrance Sunday mobilising Veterans, Members, Cadets and helpers to sell poppies all over the Town Centre. We needed the co-operation of Basildon Council and to this day we have been most grateful for the help and support that Officers and Members have given us to enable this operation to become more and more successful. We needed a base to store wreaths, poppy trays, collecting tins and to

have a place where helpers would come to have a hot drink or to rest aching limbs. We have had many venues in the Town. We started from a room at the back of St Martin's Church but we have also had a portacabin in the old Council offices in Fodderwick, the old library in Fodderwick, an empty estate agents office and presently use the Volunteer Carer's offices in the Basildon Centre.

We are licensed to collect in Basildon Town Centre on two days a year. We are allowed to place and decorate a table in the middle of the Town Square. We did have a problem the first year of operation because the large shopping area was attracting sellers who were not from the Basildon area. This soon stopped, however, when it was pointed out to them that they would have to leave their full collecting tins with us!

I have always been grateful to Brenda and her husband Alec who live in Sevenoaks. They have been supportive of the Poppy Appeal and very helpful to me particularly if ever we run short of poppies to sell. I can invite them to lunch via Aylesford to pick up more stock.

The branch Chairman and his wife manned the stall on the Friday and at the time there was a very large helpful police sergeant in a caravan in the Town Square also. He also had a poppy tray and tin of his own. He was very particular what went in his tray. He told everyone that he would only accept silver or notes because copper filled it up too quickly.

On Remembrance Saturday my family took over the table operation and still do. I am very proud of all three of them but I simply have to walk away because they all do things that I would not have done. Still the money comes rolling in so who am I to complain. My daughters each make a silk poppy from one of the small wreaths in their coat. They will sell these to the highest bidder before making another to carry on with for the rest of the day. One year a fire engine had arrived in the square to deal with an incident and when it was all over they made the firemen undo their jackets to prove that they had bought a poppy or buy one from them on the spot. My son is a youth leader and he always stays in the square with his members who collect all day. One year it rained all day and the boys all got soaked. One pair came back to the base for a hot drink and one of my daughters told the lads that they could not get a drink while all the poppies in their tray were wet. She was only joking but half an hour later when we were worried about where they had gone they were found in the gents toilet drying them one by one under the air dryer or using paper towels. Ann was ashamed of herself and quite rightly too.

Another gaffe I made one year was applying for permission to take a car onto the square to support the table so that full collecting tins could be stored safely not on view and under lock and key. My daughter Deb obliged and we took the car onto the square. Unfortunately it was a Datsun Cherry and one member of the public took offence that on a memorial day to commemorate the sacrifices made during WW2 we were using a JAPANESE car. We decided to cover it all up with RBL posters!

Every year we like to award people who have supported the Appeal for a long time so we decided to show the films about the work of the RBL and the usual buffet. A long time ago one of the members' wives made a huge fruit cake. We tried and tried to get the knife through the icing but in the end I took it off. The outside of the cake was burnt out of all recognition and it wasn't cooked at all in the middle. I wondered why the cook hadn't come.

My claim to fame was the VE day celebrations. The Headmaster of Laindon School arranged a concert and invited all the veteran that the RBL could muster. We offered to do the refreshments for afternoon tea. We wanted to do something in red, white and blue. We decided on blancmange. Red and blue was easy and I had cake colouring in blue and it worked a treat. I had to use quite a bit to get the shade of blue but in the end they looked really nice in the dishes. I got lots of praise. Everyone was pleased until I noticed when we went out to collect the empty dishes that everyone had BLUE teeth – everyone including the MP! I wouldn't try that again.

Every year to boost funds we would have two barn dances. One was to launch the appeal and other to round everything off. For these I would make hot dogs and burgers. I did the cooking at home and would warm them up in the Church Hall. All very successful for years. The regulars were getting too old to dance and the callers too but the final straw came when the church sold the church hall. We would then have to pay rent and I decided that the point of the poppy appeal was to raise money for the legion not to spend it so we finished these.

Since then we have moved to having Quiz Nights in a smaller hall. We haven't found the brains of Britain yet but they are fun.

All the letters to the VIPs of the Town and most had replied (Nan was still in charge then). The parade was arranged and so was the reception after the service – sherry and nibbles. At the last minute the Rector decided to open the bar in the Church Hall. Consequently, nobody wanted to go home. We had been very busy the day before and to be honest I wanted to go home. I went into the kitchen to wash the sherry glasses and the chief of police came in to see me. Nan had told him I banked the money from the collections and he had wanted to know all the details. He very kindly arranged for me to have a temporary parking permit so that we would unload the money close to the entrance of the bank for added security. I asked him if the licence was 'for life!' He told me not to push my luck. I had the permit for two weeks.

Just my luck. I took over the Poppy Appeal the year later and the Chief Inspector had left and been replaced. I had to go to the police station to ask for the same arrangement the next year. I had to wait for approval but sure enough very soon afterwards a young constable delivered a permit to me. I didn't use it though as the sign read:

'THIS VEHICLE IS TRANSPORTING MONEY FOR THE ROYAL BRITISH LEGION AND HAS PERMISSION TO PARK AT THE BANK.'

Phil asked if he had brought a big sign for the house as well.

There have been quite a few hazards over the years. I had the idea once of asking the collectors to make a rota for the large shops so that I would know where they were each day and I could provide them with supplies. Monday of the second week I went to a house. I had never seen such a beautiful long driveway. At the end of it I was greeted by a lady??? (woman) hurling abuse after making her poor husband standing for hours apparently doing my job for me. She then proceeded to throw the poppy trays up her drive whilst the 'poor husband' stood shaking inside the house. Needless to say he did not come to any meetings again.

On Remembrance Sunday afternoon there is also a small commemorative service at the memorial in Laindon High Road. For many years we had a job finding a clergyman who would regularly oversee this service. All churches in the District held morning services but Laindon was our only established memorial as well as being within our Branch boundary. I had delivered wreaths all round the area to the appropriate people. The police arrived but no-one could understand who the person was standing between the two police officers present. Our chairman suggested it was perhaps a person who had been arrested and as the police station at the time was only a temporary hut they may not have had anyone to leave him with. I was amazed when he stepped forward to lay a wreath. It turns out he was a local councillor.

We have been very fortunate to have a member of the Salvation Army who always attends our parades to play the trumpet. It is good that he comes for without him we would have no music. We were in a terrible fix one year when he had his teeth out and he could not blow the trumpet while toothless. In his place he sent his son who did his best but he only managed one hymn.

Back to Basildon, the ATC are the backbone of this day. They are the only cadet force with their own band now and they have a very efficient Parade Marshall.

Over the years we have kept the tradition of the sherry reception but now in the back of the church for VIP's only. The sherry glasses are kept in a cardboard box. A few years ago while everyone was watching the march past my daughter's friend and I started to lay out the sherry glasses onto trays. My youngest daughter, Deb, poured out the last glass and notice that there were two dead beetles in it. She gasped, panicked but there was only one thing to do at that moment – hide the glass under the table. We still do not know to this day if the beetles were in the glass to begin with or were floating in the wine. We still buy the same brand to serve but from then on it was known as beetle juice.