The way we wore

Memories of clothing and fashion from WRVS Heritage Plus Portslade reminiscence group
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WRVS Heritage Plus Portslade reminiscence group watching a programme about the good old days
WRVS Heritage Plus Project
Portslade

Introduction

The WRVS Heritage Plus project is a Sussex-wide project funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. The project is running in five different areas across the county, with the aim of celebrating and recording people's individual and community histories.

This book is the result of ten weeks of reminiscence sessions based on clothing and fashion with a group of people, all over 55, who attend the WRVS Portslade day centre in Windlesham Close, Portslade (see picture over), and who wanted to share their histories and memories of the 'way they wore' with others. Many of the participants who attended are involved in the WRVS and helping with the day centre, as well as other third age and local history projects, so they came well equipped!

The group were ably facilitated by WRVS volunteer, Imogen Christie. It was also supported by the wonderful illustrations of WRVS volunteer Hannah Eaton.

The full, rich lives we have included here are just touching on the histories of those who came regularly to the sessions at the centre, and it's been hard to know what to leave out, as well as what to put in. Many of the participants had no difficulty remembering their fashion favourites and disasters over the years, and especially wearing crepe-soled shoes to avoid having to dance!

WRVS Heritage Plus works in partnership with Brighton Pavilion Museum who kindly let us see clothing from their archives and gave us a gallery talk on adornment and fashion, for men as well as women.

This will hopefully be a resource that will enable others to remember more of their history, and teach those reading it about the heritage of fashion and clothing, as well as the wonderful, creative, warm people whose memories helped to create this book.

Nicola Benge
Heritage Plus Project Coordinator
Winter 2008
Nancy Kersey

Nancy lives in Hangleton and is part of the Get Together group in the Hangleton area. She has always loved clothes and used to make her own. She is married to Wally Kersey and has been for 58 years.

‘I was in the ‘Margriteres’, it was like the Brownies but for younger girls. We wore green dresses, yellow beret and little white petals around the collar, like a flower. We looked like little flowers. I went to the church opposite where the Knoll Business Centre is now, on the Old Shoreham Road. That was when I was about five years old. Then I went to the Speedwell’s group. We wore a skirt, a blouse and sash. There were different coloured sashes depending on your rank, and a bobble on the bottom of the sash. When I was about 6 or 7, if you gave the rag and bone man your woollens, he gave you a goldfish!’

‘When I was older crossover tops were very popular, although they weren’t as low cut as people wear them now. Once I left school I stopped wearing vests and ankle socks, but others wore them, and ‘liberty bodices’ which were for young children. My mum made my clothes and she taught me how to sew.’

‘I worked in Madame Christopher’s in Western Road in Hove until say the 40s. It was a gown and milliners and they sold gowns and dresses. It was quite upmarket, so not just anybody would walk in off the street. You could have a hat made to match your outfit. My mother
always wore a hat. She used to say you never go out without a hat or gloves. She used to wear a beret a lot."

"I made all my own clothes. I had a skirt-flat front, then pleated all down the sides. Tops with tulip sleeves, V necks, sweetheart necks. I made a cross over top like the ones fashionable now. I’ve still got the patterns. I used to wear them with three tier wedge shoes, high heels, or peep toes. I made swing back jackets, coats, and smocks when I was pregnant. I remember ‘3 tier’ wedge shoes in the 1940s. I had a pair of white sling backs, with three rows making up the platform and the wedge."

"I was lucky I could make clothes. In the 1940s there used to be a shop called ‘Bellman’s’ on London Road in Brighton and I got a blue and black dress there. Their motto was ‘we aim to please’. I did knitting, sewing, crochet, although I can’t do it like I used to as I now have Guillain Barre syndrome which is an illness I’ve had since 1999."

"I used to have ‘Dinky’ Curlers to make my hair curly. You had to part your hair on either side and leave a bit in the top, then put your hair clip through and put a wave in the front. I used to cut my own hair into layers, so you could have little curls all the way down. The ‘Dinky’ curlers were for the short bits. I had two mirrors so you could look at the back view too. Sometimes I did a finger wave in my hair."

"There were lots of different types of perms: ‘Tony’
perms, ‘Pinup perms, ‘Marcel wave’: that was older from the 30s. Then you could keep your rollers in, put grips in to keep them in place, or something like bulldog clips that you could clamp over the roller. You used to get a shampoo called Trixie Plus. I learnt lots working in a hairdresser as an apprentice.’

‘At another job, I used to put a turban on to hide my curlers. If you were going out that night you had to keep them in all day. I was cycling to work once and my turban blew off, all my curlers were underneath!’

‘There used to be a place on Portland Road, a hairdresser’s called ‘Kay’s’. I had my first perm there. I worked in ‘Maurice’ on Blatchington Road, a hairdresser. He had one shop up in London in Dolphin Square. He pronounced his name the French way, but he was English really. If I was going out in the evening, I wouldn’t wear much make up. Just a bit of lipstick and maybe some ‘pan stick’, but I took a lot of care with my hair.’

‘I worked at a Furriers called ‘Vianne’ in Palmeira Square in Hove. We made fur coats - there was the shop, and I was in the workroom. I remember when fur coats came in for alteration they would often smell of moth balls. We made coats from all sorts of fur including mink. I’ve got a mink collar on a little jacket of an evening dress which I made. It was sewn for me from some of the mink scraps. When it became less acceptable to wear real fur coats in the 60s someone put glue in the locks.’

Nancy as a young girl with her parents (above), and below, on her 21st birthday
‘I made the bridesmaids dresses for our wedding in 1950. We had four bridesmaids. I had four years of engagement so there was plenty of time to do it. I bought a tulip sleeve pattern for the dresses. A relation of Wally’s had a wedding dress, so I got it off her. I made it into dress with a heart shaped neck, which I altered with apple blossom from my flowers to make nicer. There were two white ribbons hanging down with two silver shoes. I brought my veil in Southampton when we went down to visit Wally’s aunt.’

‘Wally brought me a silver heart with my new initials on it. A girl on Godwin Road got married in a white lace nightie and her mum’s net curtains as a veil. They had a cardboard cake too. She married a Canadian and went to Canada with him. We got dressed up on our honeymoon for a souvenir photo in Scotland of us in kilts.’
Beryl Ballard

Beryl Ballard (nee Goatcher) was born in Gardener Street. Her dad bought a bike shop in Old Shoreham Road and because she lived in Old Shoreham Road, she went to St Nicholas Infant School at four and a half years when her brother was born.

‘My dad became bankrupt and I moved to Southwick Infant School on The Green, before we moved back to Gardener Street. I travelled back and forth on the bus to school before I was seven, and I came home at lunch time on the bus. The fare was a penny. I did four bus trips a day.’

‘I went to Benfield School when I was seven. I had a navy blue and green uniform - I loved it. My mum always bought new underwear and shoes for me, but everything else was second hand. I had a gymslip, liberty bodice and vest, tie, jumper and beret with school badge on.’

‘We carried slipper bags with us, to change our shoes, and we hung them in the cloakroom with our coats. I went on to Mile Oak Secondary Modern School for Girls.’
‘I left school at 15 and went to work at Greens. There were no exams/general certificates when I left school.’

Rod Patterson

Rod Patterson was born on North Street, Portslade and knows the area like the back of his hand. All his mum’s family were from Portslade apart from his dad who was from Yorkshire. When he came down to meet the in-laws, his father-in-law wouldn’t let him in because he called him a ‘foreigner’! After Rod’s parents were married and Rod was born, dad and granddad got on fine.

‘My mum had curling tongs which she heated in the fire – you put newspaper on them to check if they were too hot, once a week she did it. My Dad would use bicycle tyre rubber to mend our shoes. My Mum had a coat made from army blankets; lots of women had the same during the war.’

‘When I was a boy living with my Gran, she knitted me horrible balaclavas that I had to put on when I went out in the winter. All it did was make my face itch. As soon as I got out the house I took it off. I put it on again before I got back home.’

‘We never had much money to get clothes, so they used to last about two years. I was bought my first suit at about 12. It was the first time I had long trousers. Dad said it was for best only and not to go out and play in. But I had to show it off. I managed to put it on and sneak out of the house. There was an old water tank near our house full of green, stagnant water and somehow I managed to fall in with the new suit on! I went
home soaking wet and covered in green slime. I knew my mum and dad were going out, so I hid in some bushes until they left. I went indoors to try and clean the new suit but gave up and hid it in my wardrobe.’

‘One day my auntie came to visit and I was told to put on my new suit. It was in a right state and it had started to mildew. My dad went mad when he saw it, and I was grounded for two weeks. After a lot of cleaning and ironing my mum did manage to get the suit back in a state it was fit to wear again “But only for best, not to play in”.’

‘My old man never splashed out on clothes for us, he was a bit tight. But he had all his clothes made for him: suits, coats, shoes. He used to mend our shoes with bicycle tyres. He used to inspect our shoes each night. We got the mickey taken out of us when we went on the swings cos people could see the bike tyres on the soles.’

‘The first time a girl asked me out, I was 12 years old and she asked me to meet her in Victoria Park in Portslade. I borrowed my dad’s overcoat to wear. It was miles to big for me, the sleeves went over my hands, and the bottom of it went down to my feet. I put soap on my hair and went down Lock’s Hill, when it started raining. The soap came down me ears, all bubbly. I looked a right state. I didn’t go and meet her in the end.’

‘My mum was an usherette at the Rothbury, so I used to get in free. There was an old bingo hall on Portland Road; it used to be a cinema called the “Granada”. I had
a date there once. I got the bus from the old village (Portslade) and went past her on the bus standing outside the cinema. She was wearing a red coat. I lost my bottle and stayed on the bus!'

'I was in the army cadets in Marmion Road, Hove. I was so proud of this uniform. I wanted to wear it to school. I used to ask my mum if I could go to the shops, so I could wear my uniform. We went on a fortnight’s camp once in Kent. After a week I got homesick as they were so strict, so I went AWOL. They had put me on fatigues for doing something wrong, and then I was shouted at for giving too much jelly away on the dinner line. So I went to Dover station, got a ticket and went home. My dad went mad! He phone up the Drill hall in Hove and they contacted the camp. I didn’t go back after that. Dad said they would all call me a sissy'.

'I had been taught how to sew which was very useful in the army when I joined up. We’d be given our uniforms and then would have to sew the buttons on ourselves. Some of the soldiers didn’t know how to sew and I’d charge them 6d (pence) a button to sew the buttons on their uniform. I’d charge 10/- (shillings) for a coat, and we only earned £2 10/- a week. I remember putting soap inside my trouser creases (in the army) to hold them in place.'

'We only went out in our uniform for training, but it made it easy to get a lift. One day a Rolls Royce stopped to give me a lift. There were a couple in the back and they had a driver. They gave me a lift to Ports-
a date there once. I got the bus from the old village (Portslade) and went past her on the bus standing outside the cinema. She was wearing a red coat. I lost my bottle and stayed on the bus!

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lade, right to the door. They gave me 10/- which was a lot of money in 1956. Back then, you got a lot of respect if you were in uniform, but by 1970 attitudes had changed, I think due to the ‘troubles’ in Ireland.’

‘Back in 1962 in Libya, it was very hot but we weren’t allowed to wear shirt-sleeves, so we cut the collar and cuffs from our shirts and sewed them onto our jumpers to look as though we were wearing our shirts underneath. They were none too pleased when they saw what we’d done.’

‘I got married in blue, best blues’. On the morning of the wedding, I couldn’t find my medals to go on my uniform. I had to borrow them off another soldier called ‘granny’, cos he was such an old woman. He used to knit everything. He lent me his medals, but then I couldn’t find my shirt, so I wore my regimental ceremonial dress, a blue uniform with red stripes down the side of the trousers – without the shirt! It was so hot in the reception but I couldn’t take my jacket off because I didn’t have a shirt on! I only wore my ceremonial colours three times in my life.’ I sold my mess kit for £20 to another soldier when I got demobbed’.
‘It was very foggy the day I got married, and my army pal John who was driving my bride to be to the church got lost. They turned up 20 minutes late. My mother-in-law to be said, “perhaps she’s changed her mind”. This did not help my nerves much, but all went well.’

Sheila Braidwood

Sheila Braidwood (nee Goatcher) went to Benfield Juniors and then onto Portslade Secondary Modern for Girls, which of course is now Portslade Community College. She left there 1967, went to work for Sainsbury’s, until she joined the Women’s Royal Air Force (W.R.A.F) in October 1969. She and Beryl Ballard are sisters.

‘I can remember going to senior school and thinking, God, this place is big. It was just one building - A block - Portslade Girls School. I did like school. I even liked Miss Hawkings. She taught science and biology. She was a big lady - used to wear knitted suits and Jesus sandals and rode a scooter. Her voice just told you everything - we wouldn’t take the mickey out of her. She remembers me because I used to take care of the guinea pigs and rabbits.’

‘When you got to 13 or 14 years old, you were allowed to wear stockings. I remember the parquet floors - you could slide across them in leather soles. I went up with
lots of the primary children to Portslade Secondary Modern and had a grey and yellow uniform.

We started talking about dressing up on Saturday night and quickly discovered that everyone used to go to The Regent – a dance hall by the clock tower in Brighton, where Boots is now....

BERYL: “We walked around more than we actually danced. There was a fabulous sprung dance floor. I went there between 1958 and 1964 I expect. I used to finish work at 5.30 pm and be there by 7 pm. We got the bus from Portslade to the clock tower—took it from the old Green Sponge factory. It cost sixpence each way on the bus I remember. Thursday was hits night—60s stuff—jive and rock’n’roll.”

NANCY: “We went there in the 40s. There was Sid Dean and his band I remember. We used to go on a Saturday night. Wally came but he never danced. He wore those Hush Puppies, didn’t you Wally? Couldn’t dance in Hush Puppies. There were tea dances too, then. Ladies wore hats and gloves, girls danced together. I had a Frenchman ask me to dance once. He wanted to see me home. My dad would have killed me. I told him I had to get the bus all the way home. That it would take ages. He wouldn’t come all that way.”

BERYL: “It was my mum who would have killed me, not my dad. We did proper dancing like the fox trot and the quickstep too.”

ROD: “I didn’t go dancing. My brother did.”

TREVOR: “It was very territorial. I had a girlfriend”
then and I came home on leave to find that another bloke was knocking around with my girlfriend.... I went straight up to him at the bar and said, “I owe you a pint – you’ve taken her off my hands”. That shocked her. He and I became good mates much to her disgust.

“There was a promotion at the Regent once called “The strongest man in the world”. There were six of us volunteers. We had to go into the middle of the dance floor and pull these chest expanders. They made us take our tops off but one lad insisted on wearing his vest, and another got his nipples caught in the springs! There were two of us tied for first place, managing to open the expanders fully and hold them for nearly a minute. We were given six tickets each to watch the film *The World’s Strongest Man* in the good seats of the cinema.”

“There was a glitter ball above the dance floor and we paired up with a likely lass to do a spot waltz. If the light shone on you were out and the last couple got a prize. Girls looked like girls in those days, all individual with their hooped skirts, many home made, stockings and suspenders and high heeled shoes, not forgetting their backcombed beehive hairdos which were completely waterproof due to the lacquer!”

**BERYL:** “Other places in the sixties were Cliftonville Hall, St Richard’s Hall, Hove Town Hall and Sherry’s Victorian dance hall, but there were fights in the street there.”

**TREVOR:** “There was The Florida rooms in the
Aquarium. I saw The Who, Jimi Hendrix, and the Temperance Seven. In the early sixties I saw Tommy Steele. The Chinese Jazz Club was the place to be for the new trad jazz. Remember the skiffle? The Hippodrome was a really good theatre for variety acts – Frankie Vaughan, Petula Clark, Edmund Hockridge and many more. The Beatles were one of the last acts to perform there.

NANCY: ‘I had dancing shoes in leather. There was a shoe shop on George Street in Hove. Everyone went there. There were three tier wedges, sling backs, stilettos. I walked all over the Dyke in those heels…’

ROD: ‘What were you doing on the Dyke?!

BERYL: ‘I was fifteen when I first went. I couldn’t afford a drink. I was a smoker though. I used to get a sub off my gramps. 10 bob. I had to give it back to him. That paid for the bus, entrance to The Regent and a packet of smokes. I went with my friend – a tiny little lassie – who worked on the production floor at Green’s. She was 16, four months older than me but she couldn’t even get into the bar because she looked too young. I could at 15. There were bouncers on the door but it was never any trouble to get in – I sailed in. I used to have a Babycham when I could afford it.’

TREVOR: ‘Being a lad, to get into the bar your voice had to break early and you had to be quite tall. I’d often have a quart of brown ale and cider. Occasionally I would have a Stingo (Barley wine) which would really give you a buzz. It was pre-drugs. In the Army I often went into Andover where I fell in with some blokes in a band. They were – Reg Presley and the Troggs. We got them a gig in the sergeant’s mess but they altered the words of their songs and got booted out. For example “night in the long grass” instead of “night of the long grass”. My, how things have changed!’

ROD: ‘Drink? I’d just finished my 10 weeks army training and we were due to go out in Chichester to mark the passing out. That night the bloke who was in charge of the cash disappeared with the lot of it. I was in the Royal Sussex. So instead we took a train to Portsmouth and met some naval lads and went out with them. I can’t remember what happened. I woke up in the cells. Someone had phoned up the military police and we were flung in the nick. I had a wooden bed, no blankets. They didn’t punish us more, just said: “We hope you’ve learnt your lesson…”

TREVOR: ‘One Christmas whilst on Border Patrol we were invited up in to a Voppo tower (a Russian border lookout). The Russian squaddies had their Russian army issue vodka which they were keen to share with us. Russian army issue vodka is like white treacle and needs to be diluted before it can be drunk. We spent four days finishing it off and when we came to leave we were unable to get down the ladder. It was one of the best Christmases I’ve ever had!

‘We had a Russian issue Christmas box – crackers, sweets and the rest. After exchanging parts of our
uniforms we played a bit of music, quite quietly so as not to draw attention to ourselves.'

Sathi Sivapragasm

Sathi comes from Sri Lanka and has been in England for 35 years. She wears beautiful saris and shares stories of how in the 1950s when she was young in Sri Lanka, they had all the latest gramophones and dances that young people of a similar age in Britain had. She said that Colombo the capital of Sri Lanka was very cosmopolitan and sophisticated. So they had all the music, dances and fashion very similar to here. Her mother used to make them all the fifties petticoats for the flouncy dresses....

‘We didn’t wear saris as children - we’d wear our school uniforms or “frocks” and sometimes my mother made clothes for us. Maybe some of the clothes that she bought for us were imported. I started wearing saris to go out, when I was about 18 or 19 years old, and then I wore them most of the time once I got married. You can buy cheap clothes now, they’re not made to last.’

‘I liked the fashions back then. There were lovely dresses that were made of “glazed cotton”, and clothes made of “seersucker” material. I remember seeing the queen in 1954 in Ceylon. She was on a Commonwealth tour. Clothes were so expensive but we all dressed up. The queen was like a god. My mum made two dresses for me, just in case one went wrong. This event was talked about and remembered fondly in my family.’

‘Christmas started in September when we were making the cake, soaking it in brandy. Christmas was a lovely
The Way we Were

atmosphere, carols and everything, party frocks, lots of frills. Lots of relatives, so many religions in Sri Lanka and so we were allowed two public holidays per religion per year – Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Tamil… so we all celebrated everything! We had Natal Papa (Father Christmas). We ate turkey, chicken, whatever. There was all the cinnamon trade with the Arabs...
until 1505. After this point, Portuguese sailors were washed ashore in Colombo and within 500 years, followed by Dutch and English. So many flavours and tastes were introduced into Sri Lankan food.'

'My wedding dress was a pure silk red sari, the wedding colour. It was red with gold thread and a red choli (top) underneath. Lots of gold jewellery and flowers. My friends helped me to get dressed on my wedding day. The flowers were jasmine and I wore lipstick. I had a red spot on my forehead made from turmeric, which is also used as an antiseptic. Women wear a black spot on their forehead before they get married, red after.'

'My husband wore a pure silk saorang; it was ivory silk and a kind of Salwarkameez over it. It went down to his ankles. He didn’t wear shoes, nor did I. It is a tropical country so we didn’t wear shoes, only the British wore shoes. They made us wear them in church. There always has had two wedding ceremonies: one civil registry, and one cultural ceremony.'

'At the cultural ceremony, they put a solid gold necklace around my neck. Mine had 13 gold sovereigns on it. It has to be a primary number of coins on a necklace, so that it is non divisible... like the couple! I didn’t have a honeymoon, people did have them in Sri Lanka, but I came to England to join my husband who was living here.'
Trevor Povey

Trevor is a Portslade person, born and bred. He spent his halcyon years riding around the area in a leather jacket (on loan from a friend), meeting in coffee bars and “doing the ton” before swapping his clobber for army gear and Regular Service....

“I worked on a farm at Truleigh Hill, so for me, Brighton was full of strange people all competing with one another!”

“At the back entrance of the ‘Regent’ cinema, (where Boots is now in Brighton), there was a posh coffee bar (the Zodiac) frequented by kids into fashion (mainly Mod) - I never was and felt like a country bumpkin. My working attire consisted of an ex army great coat, battledress trousers, hob nailed boots (the hob nails cost a bit extra but lasted longer) and occasionally Wellingtons.”

“I had everything I needed here in Portslade. The coffee bars had a juke box, Coke by the gallon, and those Gaggia coffee machines. I used to hang out in Dell’s Café in Station Road and sometimes Rio’s in North Street. For a while I frequented the “Soup Kitchen” in Upper Market Street, the Can Can and the Pam Pam in Preston Street and Scorpio’s in Waterloo Street. I definitely felt out of place in the Whiskey a Go Go but fitted in at the Zanzibar.”

“When I went out, I always wore pegged jeans, stripy jumpers and sweaters, with the sleeves rolled up, or a t-shirt on my motorbike. My going out clobber was no different from my day gear. I had lime green and orange
socks, winkle pickers, and in the ‘60s a duffle coat. 19 bob it cost - a whole lot of money.’

‘My favourite fashion house was the Army Surplus Stores in George Street, Hove. Apart from supplying my work clothes, I could get everything that I needed for a reasonable price under one roof. The salesman was great at finding just the right fit, although I was a bit wary when he measured my inside leg for a hat! I spent a lot of time in a leather jacket, they didn’t cost so much then. I did a swap with a mate after borrowing his leather jacket for months at a time.’

‘Pegging jeans (tapering to fit the contours of your leg) was an art. I could never afford the posh labels that you could shrink fit by sitting in alternate baths of hot and cold water. A mate of mine’s mum would peg mine for 5/- instead of just sewing in another tapered seam she would cut and re-stitch the material which then became stronger than before. There were problems with getting them on and off in a hurry; some had a zip at the bottom to allow easy access but this often broke and many is the time I had to stitch myself in before going to school.’

‘I also had an Elvis quiff which needed great splodges of Brylcreem to keep it in place. Once outside you were at the mercy of the wind. Once dressed to kill, liberal amounts of Old Spice would be applied. You can imagine the stench created when large numbers of lads were in close proximity.’

‘I remember I had to wear ex-army PT shorts on a date once as I had nothing else to wear. The girl’s old man ribbed me senseless!’
“We went down to my Gran’s (at Christmas) so we had to dress up a bit. We used to pay a penny to make a Christmas calendar at school. On Christmas Eve, my dad would come home with a tree strapped to the side of his bike. We would all put it up on Christmas Eve and decorate it with real candles and tinsel. Plus a few glass balls. Mum would bake sausage rolls and prepare the veg for the next day.’

‘On Christmas Day we would open presents, the men would go to the Portland Pub. When they came home they played billiards until dinner was ready when the billiard table would be converted into the dinner table for at least a dozen people. After dinner the ladies would sit and enjoy a matter whilst the men then washed up in the kitchen.’

‘On Boxing Day, other family members would come to you; you’d stuff yourself solid all over again. Cinnamon and nutmeg would be added to the apple pie. Then on the 27th you’d have to go back to work.’

‘When I joined the Army I was quite proud of my uniform. In truth I probably looked a right div. My beret was so big that I’m sure that if I could have run fast enough I would have taken off. Battledress was still all the rage and the shirts were Khaki K F. I think the K F stood for camel fur, goodness did they itch.’

‘I was an “A” vehicle mechanic” working on tanks. I chose tanks because they were harder to break. I spent most of my time in overalls as black as your hat. I was
pretty fit in those days; you had to be, a tank clutch would weigh three hundredweights. I used to wear women’s tights on exercise as temperatures were often as low as minus twenty seven degrees.’

‘Spanners would stick to your fingers and you would have to put them in warm water to get them off without removing skin.’

‘Physical exercise was of great importance and we would have a five mile run before starting work. I used to throw the hammer and was in the Divisional Tug of War team.’

*My very own tank, a Conqueror ARV Mk 2, the last running in BAOR*

*Here I am fifth from the left in the front next to the Physical Training Instructor*
Wally Kersey

Wally spent his early years in the forces and so got used to wearing uniforms of one type or another. He returned to Hangleton after four years away in the forces and married Nancy.

‘At the age of 12, I was a volunteer in the Naval Reserve, so when war started, they disbanded us at the King Alfred in Hove and then I joined the Brighton Sea Cadets and later the Hove Sea Cadets in ’42. Two evenings a week I was an apprentice at Caffyns garage, I went to night school two nights a week then sea cadets at the weekend, so I was either in cadet gear or work gear, I didn’t get to go out much socialising.’

‘When I did wear mufti it was: flannels, a jacket, pull-over, shirt and tie. I always had clean, polished shoes. I was 13 when my dad was killed in the war. He was strict and made me learn needlework and cooking in case of emergencies. Mum would unpick a coat so she could reverse the material and the worn cloth would be inside and unseen. This increased the life of a coat or garment. Shirt collars would be ‘turned’. This was especially common between the wars. I was in the cubs, the scouts and age 12 joined the sea cadets. We wore the blue jackets uniform: bell bottoms and a blue collar and later a peak cap, black tie and white shirt with a jacket.’

‘The cadet uniform was blue serge bell bottom trousers, blue jean collar, three white bands around the edge, a black silk which was folded to two inches wide with a white lanyard around the neck secured by black tapes of regulation length of six inches at the bottom of the V front of jacket. There were seven creases in the trousers for the seven seas, also so you could fold them up to put in your locker, cos of space on the ship, you turned them inside out, folded them up and did the same for the jacket and collar.’

‘In the Navy, we wore blue hats in the winter. In the summer, from May to 1st October, we had a white cap unless serving in the Middle and Far East where we wore uniforms of whites (tropical gear).’

Wally in the Naval Cadets

‘The name for the uniform of the lower deck ratings was ‘A Square Rig’. This was jacket and bellbottom trousers and navy blue jersey. This was replaced with a white front in the summer. Petty Officers and above, their uniform was different and was referred to as Fore Aft rig which was Navy Blue jacket trousers, white tie,
cap with peak, white material cap covers if needed in summer or tropics. We wore white hats, which we had to whiten with Blanco. Nowadays everything is white plastic instead. With those hats, if it rained, the Blanco used to come off. We had starched collars which we had to do ourselves.'

"After my basic training in the Royal Sussex Regiment, I was transferred to REME (Royal Electrical Mechanical Engineers) with most of my time spent with water transport and with attachments to the Royal Marines in the Middle East. My pre-services training for the Navy did help me get to sea but in the wrong colour uniform!"

"During the army in Africa in the winter, it was so cold, we wore normal army kit. Often it would require overcoats to be worn on guard duties. In February, in the wet season, there was torrential rain and everything flooded on the desert and we all lost our kit. We used to suffer desert storms, locusts and 'shatehawks' (birds like hawks), you had to watch your dinner so the birds didn't get your food.'

"Army Uniforms were mainly battledress during World War II. The uniform was of a rough serge of khaki colour. It consisted of a blouse type jacket, trousers, boots and the gaiters.'

"When the Canadian army arrived on our shores, their uniforms were of the same types as ours but were of a better quality material. Also, the colour of jacket and trousers matched with ours. We had to be lucky for the
colour match, as they were made in different factories. Many soldiers would scrounge for the Canadian uniform and wear them for best.'

‘In 1951 I got called up to the Korean War as a reservist. I used to have a hat with fur around the edge and big flaps that you could fasten up, or let hang down over your ears to keep them warm. I used to wear it during the winter when I took the dog for a walk. I've still got my army beret somewhere. Most men wore their uniform when they went out, ‘No I dress’. The important thing was to be clean and tidy.’

‘We were given ‘demob' clothes when we left the army — a two piece single breasted suit, shirt, tie, a trilby, raincoat, shoes and socks. We had clothing coupons then, so you would save your coupons for your fiancée's wedding clothes. When we got married, I wore a blue suit made at a shop in Brighton. It was made specifically for the wedding, and I had a couple of fittings. I had new shoes too. I didn’t wear my demob suit.’

‘Nancy’s dad wore his demob suit to our wedding. They were all a certain style. You could tell they were a demob suit. We still had clothing coupons in the early 1950s, so if you went to southern Ireland, you’d take an empty suitcase and buy clothes, including American imports, to bring back. I got a pair of blue suede shoes!’
About this project

The Heritage Plus Project is run by WRVS (formerly known as WVS), a charity which has been in existence since 1938. It is based in Sussex and aims to encourage people to explore their histories, and to participate in the process of reminiscence in a creative way through the mediums of crafts, photography, writing, performance and many other forms. It is also a way to create friendships across generational lines and promote respect for older people through education.

WRVS provides a range of practical services nationally to help and support older people to live well, maintain their independence and play a part in their local community. It works in partnership with other charities and organisations, local authorities and the NHS, supporting communities throughout England, Scotland and Wales to be strong and cohesive.

Volunteers play a vital role: nearly 55,000 of them - both men and women - give up their time to help other people and to make life better in their communities. Together with WRVS staff they deliver professional services with a personal touch.

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WRVS Heritage Plus community history website!

This exciting website showcases diverse and fascinating personal histories from people within Sussex, including audiovisual extracts. Designed in part by WRVS Heritage Plus volunteers.

Archive your memories:

This website is a beautiful way to promote positive ageing along with archiving valuable memories that would otherwise be lost. This gives everyone the opportunity to record their stories, their lives and their loves or research their local area. Heritage Plus brings together people of all ages to explore their histories and life experiences – their shared heritage. This site will enable young and old to add their own family heritage for people worldwide to view and comment on.