



Fred in East Finchley, 2005. Photo by John Dearing

Tales from the Far East

By Daphne Chamberlain

After the Gang Show (see above) Fred Pentland-Firth was sent out to the Far East. He has happy memories of "beautiful" Kashmir, where last month's earthquake struck. "We went up to the hill stations for a break from the heat." This was 1946, and Fred's RAF unit was helping to restore infrastructure and vehicles after World War II.

Next stop was Burma, where he found chaos in the centre of Rangoon. "The docks were smashed, tramlines were standing up like javelins in the roads, there was no electricity, no sanitation. We lost two men from smallpox, but the Burmese were so friendly - and so clean. They washed completely at standpipes at street corners, their longyis draped around them for privacy."

Fred thinks people today don't realise the vital part Burma played in the war. He regrets the isolation of present-day Burma, too. He wishes more people could see the Schwe-daym Pagoda, the world's biggest Hindu temple, its roof restored after being stolen in the war. He remembers beautiful bamboo houses intact in the suburbs of Rangoon whose wealthy occupants invited RAF units to see stylised Burmese dances and outdoor boxing-matches.

Fred worked on restoring the many vehicles sent over for war use by the UK and the USA. They had been corroding in the humid heat, but once made over, were sold at auction "for next to nothing". He was one of the drivers who transported them

to their new homes - sometimes up at the Chinese border.

It was hard to settle after all this, but his "most interesting job" was still to come. In the early 1980s, he spent four years in Zimbabwe, supervising the refining of gold and silver from slime in the copper mines - but that is another story.

Farmers' Market news

By Daphne Chamberlain
There will be farmers' markets at Alexandra Palace on 6, 13 and 27 November, and 4 and 11 December. Organiser Chris Elder is also planning one Saturday market in December, with a date to be confirmed.

The market needs an alternative site for Sundays when Alexandra Palace is not available. The organisers would like to know of any reasonably large site with a hard-standing surface, preferably close to Alexandra Palace.

For details and updates, please contact 020 8291 1124 between 9am and 5pm Mondays to Wednesdays, or 07780 520 610.

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Curtain up on the Gang Show

By Fred Pentland-Firth

Fred Pentland-Firth of Market Place, N2, responded to our request for VJ Day memories with something entirely unexpected. Here's his story in his own words:

On VJ Day in 1945 I was stationed in the RAF at Chigwell, being groomed with hundreds of other "erks" for technical work in mobile signals units in the Far East. After peace was declared, the gates were thrown open. We were given three days' unconditional leave.

I spent mine in the city, and was present in Piccadilly Circus on VJ Day and beyond. What a celebration - unbelievable! People just went mad. There were fireworks, and all inhibitions just disappeared. Total strangers welcomed soldiers and airmen in uniform, and invited us to their homes.

Next stop - the Albert Hall

Chigwell was now behind me, and I was posted to join Ralph Reader's Gang Show as an electrical technician. They were putting on a Pageant of the RAF in the Royal Albert Hall on 23 September 1945. "So go to it, you guys! You've only got a month for rehearsals," we were told.

We were living in St Regis Hotel in Old Burlington Street and in Houghton House in Aldgate.



Fred Pentland-Firth in Kashmir, 1946

Some nights the rehearsals were conducted at the American Air Base at Chipping Ongar. Sheer hard work for just one night's celebration at the Albert Hall!

It went off perfectly well, and was a sell-out. We all had a whale of a time. The first public pageant of the peace we had just gained was something I shall always remember. I still have

my performer's pass for the Albert Hall on that date.

Later, I flew out to India, via Morocco, Egypt and Iraq to Karachi - and thereby hangs another tale...

Remembering the Few

By Diana Cormack

Sixty-five years after the event, Prince Charles has unveiled a memorial dedicated to those who fought in the Battle of Britain.

The monument is on London's Victoria Embankment, close to the former RAF Headquarters. It consists of sculpted panels depicting scenes from those days between July and October 1940 when a small number of fighter pilots and crew from 14 countries fought the German Luftwaffe in the air. As well as honouring "the Few" who took to the skies, the Battle of Britain monument also pays tribute to all those on the ground who contributed to this remarkable victory.

The idea for a memorial came from Bill Bond, founder

of the Battle of Britain Society, and was created by sculptor Paul Day. It cost £1.65 million and was funded entirely by public donations.

The Society still requires funding to complete the project and maintain the monument. You can send a donation, payable to "Battle of Britain of London Ltd", to 11 Greenland Rd, Barnet EN5 2AL. For more information visit www.bbm.org.uk

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