

**Stanley Wilkins** (1922 – 2013) was a local jazz band drummer in West Bromwich, until he went to India in 1943 at the age of 21. He served in the R.A.F as an aircraft fitter, though he also continued to play in dance bands, all over the sub-continent. Stanley was a founding member of West Bromwich Local History Society.



Stan Wilkins, West Bromwich 1938, holding his first drum.

“My mother and father separated when I was two, I think it was due to the fact that mother’s family came from tradespeople and my father came from poor folk. I don’t think the family accepted him. I’ve never spoke to him and I only have one photograph of him. So mother, Eleanor, came back to the family house in Price Street, a big semi detached, two frontages, four bedrooms. There lived my mother’s father, his sister and her husband. Grandfather’s wife died when mother was two, so she didn’t have many people close.

“Grandfather was a haulage contractor, lorries with solid tyres. My uncle was brought up on a farm at Churchfields and his brother lived at Forge Farm. My uncle had two floats and delivered milk in big churns to the posh end of West Bromwich, Beeches Road. The little servant girl would come out with the jug. At our house they dug down in the garden deep enough to place a big milk churn with an iron lid to keep the milk cool.

“Mother did a bit of work for her father’s business in those days. I was the only child in a large family, so I did very well – Meccano and Hornby railway for birthdays and Christmas. I went to Lodge Estate school and passed the exams for grammar school at the age of ten.



Above: This is my Great Uncle Thomas Turvey, who was a dairyman. Taken in 1908. He kept his two horses in a garage on Edward Street, which is now a Sikh Temple. He won the 2nd prize in the Dartmouth Park Fete Horse Turnout Competition of that year.

Right: An early photograph of Stan and his mother, Eleanor.





This is my class at Lodge Estates School. I was aged nine. I've marked it with a little black line, at the back wall, fifth left, to the right of one of the school mistresses, in front of one of the pictures.

“I didn't like Latin. Halls bookstore had all sorts of books and stationary, fiction and textbooks, including a Latin translation of classical texts. So of course Mr. Bighead here bought one and I did my homework with it. The Latin master at school took one look at it and said ‘That was a very good copy. Take a hundred lines.’ I used to write my lines out with two or three pens tied together. I had to write out ‘Empty vessels make the most sound’ - I always remember that. Madeleine Carroll's father tried to teach me French. He didn't have much success. I wasn't that much of a rebel, but I was a bit of a rebel. I was absolutely hopeless at languages. History and mathematics were my interest. Not political history, more the industrial history, social history.

“My grandfather went bankrupt in the General Strike because he kept on his drivers and carpenters for his haulage business. He carried on paying them, foolishly or goodly. He hadn't paid his petrol bills, so the petrol companies put him into court. He was quite depressed about things and he eventually got a job at the Corporation, looking after the street cleaners. The family said all this happened to him because he rode his bicycle on a Sunday and he shouldn't have done. They were like that. I think

they were behind the trouble with my mother and my father. The family were interfering strict sort of people. My grandfather's wife had died when my mother was two. He didn't get married till much later on. He then married a nurse from Northampton, so I have an aunt who is younger than I am. He was a bloke for the latest gadgets. He had a cinematographic thing, one you worked by hand. He used to show these films, newsreels and things like that, in the sitting room. He never had enough big reels so he always had to wind one lot onto the floor. He had to do it off batteries, as we had no electricity then. All these films lying about on the floor, all highly flammable, right by the open fire in the grate burning away. I'm surprised we didn't all go up in smoke. Another racket of his was he rented this big wall off the guy who owed the garage, and he used to put up all the bills for all the theatre and cinemas in West Bromwich, so we always had free passes for all of them.

“As I said, I lived on Price Street, a couple of minutes walk from the Catholic church on the corner. They had a shunting engine always at West Bromwich station, that was permanent there, moving around the good yards. They used to bring a lot of cattle in, for the shops behind Paradise Street and Moor Street. They'd do the slaughtering behind the butchers. There was pen for unloading the stations at the station and they'd be taken up the street. I used to go train spotting a lot. Sometimes I'd cycle over to Lichfield to see them, as it was the LMS line from London to the north. It was the Great Western railway here.



Stan, on the right, 1933.

“I always a cooked breakfast at home, bacon and egg, toast and marmalade. All the cooking was done on a range, a fireplace with the ovens inside. Christmas we’d cook the turkey on the jacks, with sausages hanging down, hooked onto the fire-grate crossbar to catch the oil coming out the bird. We had our proper dinner in the middle of the day, and a light tea in the evening with cake. We didn’t have electricity in Price Street. We had gas. And we had a telephone because my grandfather and uncle were both in business, one of the early telephones, where you rang up the Exchange and they asked you who you wanted and then they put you through.

“There was a good toy shop at the far end of the high street, at the Birmingham end, Millerships, They sold handbags and belts as well as toys. I used to get Hornby trains, toy cars there. I quite a big meccano set and not a bad train set really, clockwork of course. I used to read Detective Weekly, Dan Dare and all that sort of thing. We used to have the Corona pop people coming round, leaving two or three bottles for the week - and they’d pick up the empties. All kinds of flavours, lemonade, orangeade, all sorts of things. Coal was delivered too. Salt sellers would come round with their horse and cart and a block of salt. They’d chop off how much salt you wanted. I think they were based at Gornal.

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Advertisement for High Street Butcher, 1930's.

“The old market was a funny place. It was really just a space with a wooden roof over it, the top half was open – no glass – and stalls set out, more like old tables than stalls. Carters sold pots and pans and tea sets. He used to juggle these things, cups and saucers going up, like a showman. He never dropped one. The high class butcher on the high street was Arthur Summers, with his home-made pork pies a speciality. Firkins also made pork pies. Most ordinary people went to Firkins in Carters Green. They had Gold Medal pork pies. They were really the famous pork pie people. You could get all sizes. I don’t remember small ones like you see now, cocktail pork pies. Then they had a nice thick crust and jelly between the pork and the crust. You got nice cakes and bread from there as well, all made on the premises.

“We’d make fruitcake at home. You’d be more likely to buy sponge cakes and fancy cakes on the high street, the things you wouldn’t make at home. There’s an old saying, ‘as good as sliced bread’, but I never remember sliced bread when I was younger. Sliced bread was a more recent invention. Our bread was delivered from a man called Mr Wright. There was another baker, at Lyttleton Street, who used to cook Xmas dinners for us. You could order meat from the butchers and he’d deliver it. There was quite a lot of delivery in those days when you think about it, to save people carrying big bags of shopping. Eldorado ice cream men would come round in the summer, on three wheel tricycles with a box selling ice cream.

“As a child, we’d take the train to places like Rhyl for a week’s holiday and South Wales or Weston Super Mare, that was a popular place. You know, I went up in an airplane when I was twelve. At Weston Super Mare with my mother and I suppose you’d call him her boyfriend. He lived in South Wales and that day he wanted to go to see the Morris motor works at Oxford and I didn’t. I found out there were running a daily air service from Weston to Cardiff, so I said I’d go on that myself. He paid for it. It was an 8-seater De Havilland. All I did on the other side of the Bristol Channel was take a bus into Cardiff, go to a fish and chop shop, wander around and fly back, all by myself.

“My life was so complicated. My mother was never divorced – you didn’t in those days. When we were on holiday together her boyfriend was supposed to be my father, when we were elsewhere he was supposed to be my uncle. So life got difficult sometimes. The family didn’t approve anyhow, but that didn’t stop my mother. In later years, when my mother had a house of her own, he used to come and visit here. He lived at Neath. He was from Brecon originally. He was employed as an electrician on the local buses, so we used to get to travel everywhere free when we went down there. We used to go to Langland Bay, went all over the place. My mother met him one time at Weston Super Mare on holiday. So we often went down there for Christmas as well. I got on well with him. He was all right.



Above: Eleanor and Stan, 1930.

Right: Eleanor and Stan, on holiday, approximately 1937.



Eleanor & Stanley  
Langlund

“When I left school in 1934, I started an apprenticeship at GEC to become an electrician, but I got fed up doing armatures and left. I didn’t settle to anything and I wasn’t very well behaved. I went through a series of jobs, a clerk at a grocery warehouse at Sots Hole, at Tangyes, Chance Glass Factory, working in the office. Eventually I took up in a dance band with two friends, Bob Carter and Phil Pickett. Phil later joined the air force and became a pilot, went all through the war and survived. He ended up in Rhodesia teaching people to fly. He died in a flying accident.

“Bob’s father was the organist at the Chapel in Lyng Lane and he was quite a good pianist, so we formed a little trio. At the chapel in Old Meeting Street, where the Hindu Temple is now built, we put on a little concert. Bass, piano, drums. We played Duke Wellington’s ‘Caravan’, which is ridiculous really as it was normally played with about 18 people. There was some heavy tom tom work in it. It’s a really nice tune. From my early teens I was listening to music. I enjoyed big band music, with a brass section and a wind section. We had an old wind up gramophone at home and for the radio we’d got the accumulator and the 120 volt battery, but we had to go and get the accumulator charged. Luckily, there was a garage across the road and we’d do it there. The other entertainment of course was the pictures. In West Bromwich, the Tower Cinema was the posh place to go to. That was my favourite picture house. They’d got double seats for courting couples at the back upstairs, and a good organist.

“I kept in the band business and made a decent living. I was freelance. I would go anywhere that’d put up with me. I wasn’t permanent with anyone, I’d stay a few months. I played over a 1000 dances. I played mostly with smaller bands, up to 8 piece, dances in local baths, church halls, Sunday concerts. And I saw Duke Ellington, Glenn Miller, Count Basie.

“When I was a teenager, I used to go to the milk bar by the Wesleyan chapel, the shop to the right, which was later a fish and chip shop and is now Subway I think. It was kept by Claude Roe, a bit of a rogue. He had a hand in a lot of things. It even had a jukebox in late 1930’s, all big band stuff. It was a meeting place for young people. Claude got into the band business and he hired all the musicians. He had a Sunbeam Talbot car and always had a few ladies around him. He didn’t play anything, but he was the promoter. He had another place in Dudley on the hill, Maxims, which was a bit posher. I would go anywhere that’d put up with me. I wasn’t permanent with any one band. I’d stay a few months. I played mostly with smaller bands, up to an eight piece, dances in local baths, church halls, the Casinos, town halls, Sunday concerts, the British Restaurant in Carters Green. The two I originally started up with, in the trio, they went and worked for Mecca; they got a job at Streatham Locarno. I went down four times to see them. I couldn’t drum with them because the bloke they were working with, Eric Delaney, he was the official drummer at the Locarno. I was 18 but he was about 50. But he used to get us in the places in Soho and Hammersmith for nothing.

Programme:

CLIFTON  
SEDGELEY

1. Southern Fried.
2. Weep No More. *sol*
3. Man is Dead & Gone. ✓ — J.F. 10 Min
4. Johnson Rag.  
— Impersonator Fred & Fred 10 Min
5. Tango. 2. *Decorations & Violin*
6. Best Things in Life. ✓ *Jean Firth*
7. And So Do I. *sol* ~~J.F.~~ 10 Min
8. Blues Upstairs & Down  
— Phil at Piano — 5 Min
9. Stompin' at Savoy 5 Min
10. Tumbling Tumbleweeds.  
— Phil at Piano —  
Room 504. } — J.F. 5 Min  
Wubba Rolly. } — J.F. *My new Best a Sham*
11. Song of India 5 Min
12. Pennsylvania 6-5,000. 5 Min  
— Interval —
13. In the Mood
14. Singing for You. *sol*
15. Harlem
16. Outhave Affair. *sol* — J.F.
- Impersonator —
17. Oh Johnny. — J.F.
18. Say Si Si
19. Only for Ever. J.F.
20. You say Sweetest Things. *sol* — J.F.  
— Phil at Piano —
21. Missouri Scrambler: *Local Solo Center*
22. Sweetest Song in World. *Fred & Solo Val*  
— Local Discovery —
23. First Lullaby — J.F.
24. Johnny Pedlar. — J.F. (?)
25. Tuxedo Junction
26. Over the Hill.

Notes 11/6/6  
sol  
J.F.

“I played my last gig as a civilian with Arthur Rowberry’s Lucky Stars at the Springfield Ballroom on 15th August 1942, a concert of three hours with a short break. I was paid six shillings and one penny for that. A few days later I passed my second medical at Dale End and joined the RAF as air crew. On Saturday 22nd August I proposed to my girlfriend, Joan Priscilla Geddes. We married on October 15th, 1942 at Christchurch, West Bromwich.

“Three days later I found myself at Padgate Camp in Cheshire, where I began my training, and Joan began work at Simplex Electric. Joan used to wear very nice hats, which she made herself half the time. She used to work at Bodnam’s, the Ladies Outfitters, opposite K & J’s. One of her first jobs was to carry buckets of coal up to the third floor to heat the rooms every day. She progressed through to become a buyer for evening wear and gowns. She used to go to London to the dress shows two or three times a year, but the war changed all that. We were married on October 15th at Christchurch, West Bromwich. Those days you had to beg your commander for permission to marry. Then in April 1943, I was shipped overseas for service in India.

“I was part of a maintenance crew based in Karachi, putting Spitfire together for the Burma Front. I also played in a seven piece in the air force. We’d play all sorts of things. I did over 200 gigs. I played in an Indian band, when they were short of a drummer. I also played for an Auxiliary Fire Service band when they were short of drummer. I also appeared in a girls band. I didn’t have to dress up as a woman, but I did have to dress up as a fireman. I wouldn’t say I was a marvelous drummer, I just happened to get a lot of work. I didn’t like showing off.

“When I came home, I saw a job advertised at Steel Parts in Great Bridge. Once they saw I had been the RAF, they said ‘You’ve got the job straightway.’ The man who owned the company, one of his sons was a pilot in the air force and had been killed. Luck came into it. I started in the office and moved on to looking after the transport, then I was in charge of a warehouse where they stored the steel bar in. We built a house down Yew Tree, then moved back to West Bromwich.

“I carried on playing drums. My last gig was in 11th January 1954 at Edgbaston golf club. Strangely enough, I got interested in work. I was working at a steel company, Glynwed. The company bought a computer and I eventually became a systems analyst, in the days when they were run with punch cards. They had the first mainframe computer in the area – it filled a room and a laptop now has more computing power. When I finally stopped playing, I gave my drums to my wife’s nephew; he did well with them, playing with some well known bands, including the Ivy League.”

*Stan Wilkins was interviewed by Brendan Jackson in 2011.*



THE SARI.

MOHAMMEDAN WOMAN

BOMBAY POLICE

SEA FRONT, WORLI  
BOMBAY.

From the wartime scrapbook kept by Stan during his service in India.



The wedding photograph of Stanley Maurice Wilkins, aged 20, and Joan Priscilla Geddes, aged 21; 1942.

153

The Officer Commanding  
2 Wing,  
A9 Squadron,  
153 Entry,  
35. S. G. T. T.  
13<sup>th</sup> November 1942.

I, 1695700 A.C.2. Wilkins have the honour to apply  
for a Sleeping Out Pass on the following grounds.  
My wife will be residing at 30 Pleasant Street,  
Blackpool from 12.00 hrs. Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> November to 7.00 hrs.  
Monday 16<sup>th</sup> November.

Necessary documentary evidence:

Wife's Identity Card attached.

Marriage Lines unavoidably handed to Accounts Department  
RAF Blackpool Buildings in Saturday last for forwarding  
to Air Ministry South Farm 850.



I have the honour to be, sir,

Your obedient servant,  
A.C.2. Wilkins.

Stan's letter requesting permission to leave camp, 1942.



Stan and Joan's first house, pictured (rear view) in the early 1950's, and (front view) within a few years as the Yewtree estate develops.