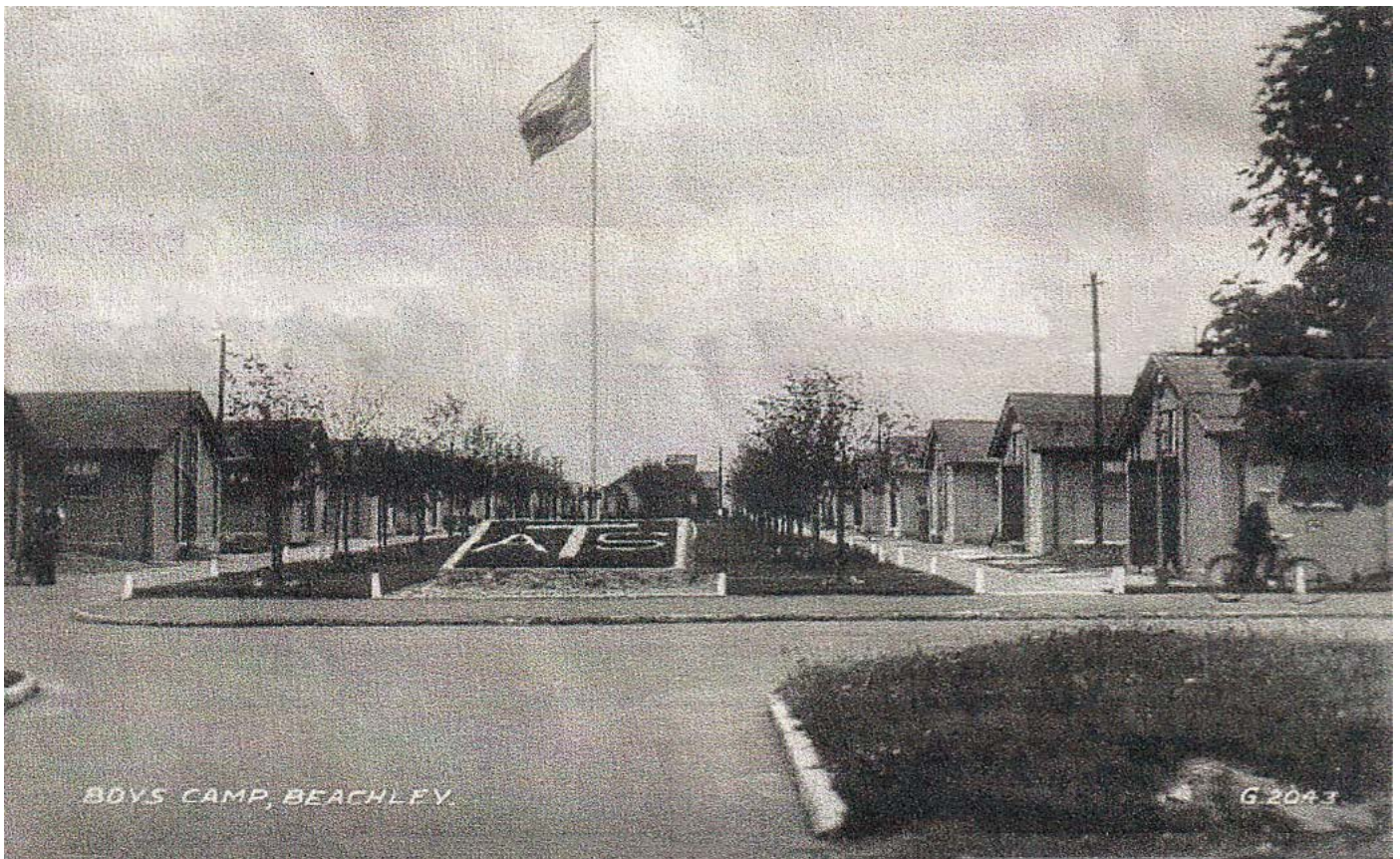


## Army Apprentice Tradesmen

**At** the start of the 1939-45 War the Army stopped recruiting boy Apprentice Tradesmen. However, in 1942 the practice was recommenced and, as a result, in April of that year approximately two hundred youths between the ages of 14 and 16 years arrived at the Army Technical School, Beachley Camp, near Chepstow. Some were orphans, several were in short trousers, and many had never left home before. The arrival at Chepstow station (after a wartime train journey [from Paddington in my case]) was a traumatic experience on its own-but worse was to come! Shouting NCO's herded us new arrivals onto 'Army lorries and we were then driven off into what seemed the wilds, (in the blackout), eventually delivering us to Beachley Camp, a WW1 wooden hutted, ex German Prisoner of War camp, on a point of land at the confluence of the rivers Severn and Wye. What a bleak place it was in April-and even bleaker in the following three winters that I spent there.



Army Technical School, Beachley

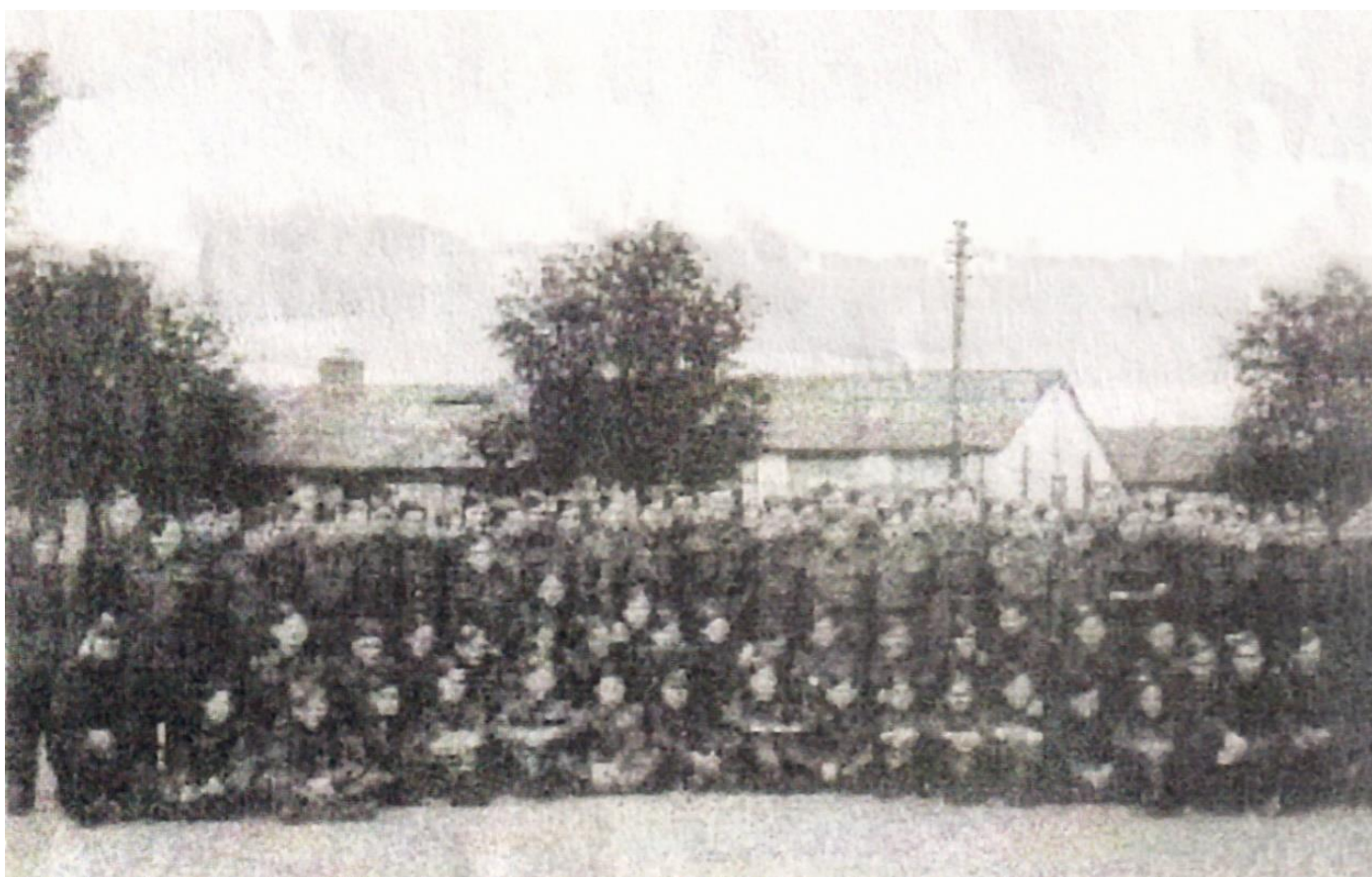
**The** huts were in the form of the letter 'H'. The two long legs being divided to form a total of four rooms, each housing sixteen boys. In the corner of each room was a small separate room occupied by the room's boy NCO. The connecting building between the two legs was the toilets and washroom (cold water only for washing and shaving). Each boy had a bed space containing an iron bed, a mattress consisting of three square 'biscuits' (as hard as the iron of the bed), three very thin blankets, and a six foot tall metal locker. On the wall behind each bed were hooks on which we subsequently had to hang our webbing equipment in a very regimental fashion.

**Having** arrived at our new 'home', and been shown our bed space, we were then ordered outside and marched to the cookhouse. Unfortunately, being wartime, our train



had been late and our meal, consisting of a fried egg and mashed potatoes, was completely cold. Still, the one slice of bread, with a scrape of margarine (always known as the grease), hadn't been spoiled, and the accompanying mug of cold milk helped it down. The reason for the meal fiasco was that the boys who had joined up before the war were all away on leave, as were most of the cooks. This left a minimum of staff to run the cookhouse.

**The** next few days were really hectic. Medical and dental checks, inoculations, issue of clothing (denim overalls, boots, socks, etc), instructions as to what we could (or must) do, and what we could not (or must not) do. Strict orders as to how our beds were to be made up and then not to be sat on until after duties for the day. We had to parcel up our civilian clothing and this was all then sent home. (By the time we were to go on our first leave, due to our training, this clothing would no longer fit us. As all clothing was on coupons, which were not issued to the services, for most of us this meant no civilian clothes until after the war ended. Only Army boots for footwear for three years!).



**42A Group, 'C' Company, (early days)**

**Then** there was the 'square-bashing'. Until we were considered to be sufficiently well trained we were confined to camp. This would take several weeks as a very high standard was demanded. Anyway, we couldn't be allowed out in public until we had been fitted out with 'Service Dress', a high collared tunic buttoned right up to the neck, and our peaked caps. This uniform, together with our white blanched belts, marked us out as 'Beachley Boys'.

**A** short time after our arrival the senior boys (aged 18-19) returned from their leave. We now had boy NCO's (known as Apprentice Tradesmen NCO's) in each room to take charge. This was not just a nominal duty, they were responsible for the room and drew up

a weekly roster of duties, each boy in the room being allocated certain cleaning duties, such as, scrubbing one of the two trestle tables, or one of the four 6ft benches in the room, cleaning lampshades, polishing the coal-bin, cleaning the ablutions, toilets, etc. The A/T NCO's duties also included getting us out on parade, properly dressed for parade, meals, duties, etc. In addition to the allocated duty on the weekly roster each boy was also responsible for his own bed-space, polishing the floor until it gleamed, dusting his locker and every ledge, ridge, shelf, cleaning the window behind his bed, as well as having all his clothing, webbing and kit in perfect order. Kit inspections were a regular feature. Everything had to be laid out on your bed in a very precise order (we used to chant a litany of the order that certain items were to be displayed - knife, fork, spoon - razor, comb & lather-brush). Shirts and Pt kit had to be folded exactly nine inches square. Socks were rolled in a particular way, and if an undarned hole was found you could guarantee you were in trouble. Boots had to have thirteen studs on the sole and a complete and serviceable steel heel plate. Spare leather bootlaces were rolled into a precise coil. The back of the two boot brushes had to be scrubbed a pristine white. And so it went on. If your kit wasn't laid out precisely as ordained, and in perfect order (and sometimes even if it was) it would all be tossed on the floor and you would be ordered to lay it out again at six o'clock in the evening. This generally meant that you would also have to lay it out again at seven o'clock and, perhaps, even again at eight o'clock. After each Inspection it was swept into a heap to make sure that you didn't just leave it as it was. As fourteen and fifteen year old boys we certainly didn't have a 'cushy' life.

**At** Reveille we were expected to be out of bed, or get tipped out by the Orderly Sergeant. We then washed (and in my case, shaved) in cold water, in a draughty, unheated washroom with cement floor, raced back and prepared our bed-space for inspection. We would then fall-in outside the hut, where the A/T NCO would inspect us before marching us off to the cookhouse. This would be the first of many inspections that we would undergo throughout the day, and included a thorough check of ourselves, our clothing, polished brasses, our drinking mugs and our 'eating irons' (knife, fork and spoon).

**Another** task for these A/T NCO's was to protect us from being bullied by the senior boys, but in practice this didn't work. Frequently a room would be raided and beds tipped over. Sometimes a bit of a beating for some unfortunate for an imagined insolence, or some of us would be rounded up and made to go to the senior boys rooms. There you might have to clean their kit or boots, or carry out their room chores. On occasions you might have to sing or recite while standing with arms outstretched sideways, holding a boot in each hand while your unappreciative audience threw boots, gym shoes, etc at you. Or 'frog walk' on your haunches, the length of the room, chanting "I'm a jeep, I'm a \*\*\*\*, I'm a snivelling Rookie", all the while being hit with rolled up towels or blankets. However, we didn't have to suffer this for too long as the boys in these earlier Groups graduated to Man-service and were posted out to their Regiments or, in the case of the Artillery boys, to the Military College of Science to complete their training.



Room 6 Wing 7 42A Group, 'C' Company

**By** this time we were now into a regular routine - Physical Training, Military Training, (Drill, Weapon Training, Fieldcraft, etc), Education, and our main purpose, TRADE TRAINING. For the first few months this consisted of standing at a workbench with a chunk of metal in a vice, and chiseling, filing and scraping them into various shapes which had to be close to given measurements. One of our Instructors, a Warrant Officer Class 2, was known to us as 'Two-Thou' as he insisted on a tolerance of only + /- two thousandths of an inch - and this had to be achieved using only callipers, a steel rule and the naked eye! Part of the training was theoretical and we also had to do Workshop Drawing (making our own working drawings). Later in our training we did basic vehicle mechanics, blacksmithing, electrical fitting, lathe and milling machining, etc. Eventually, in the case of myself and the other apprentices destined for the Royal Artillery, we went on to gun-fitting.

**Time** not spent on the above was NOT free time. For a start, unless you was an A/T NCO you could only have ONE pass a week to go out of Camp, and officially this was only to 9.30 pm (being the time that the last bus from Chepstow arrived at the Camp). I reached the dizzy height of Boy Corporal, which put me in charge of a Barrack Room and entitled me to a further TWO PASSES each week (no extra pay, not even for the Boy RSM). By now I was sixteen and had met a lovely young girl aged fifteen, so I made full use of my three passes. Eventually I was hauled up on Company Orders in front of our Major, the Company Commander. I was torn off a strip (reprimanded in a forceful manner) and told that I shouldn't be going out of Camp so often and that I should stay in and make sure my Barrack Room was to standard. As the room had won the shield for best room for several weeks this seemed a little unfair. The following morning I paraded outside the Company Office with my two stripes in my hand (instead of sewn on my sleeve) and was immediately put on a charge for being improperly dressed (and lost my rank as a Corporal, which was my purpose in being there). The outcome of all this was that in 1945, very shortly after



joining Man-Service, at the age of 18 I married that lovely young 15 year old (who was now an even lovelier 17 year old) and we have been together for 62 years, and hope for many more. *(Incidentally, this marriage landed me on Orders in front of the Lt Colonel of my Regiment - but that's another story).*

**Boys** were allocated to one of four Companies, generally by trade and Regiment or Corps. Each week one Company was the Duty Company and had to parade each evening to be detailed off for various duties as Passive Air Defence. These duties were Fire Party, Ladder Party, Rescue, Stretcher, etc. We managed to make a farce of the parade on winter evenings. Because of the blackout no lights were permitted and the Sergeant detailing the duties had to read the names from his list with the aid of a tiny slit of light from a torch. Boys would be quietly moving up and down the back of the ranks answering two or three names for mates who were away in the NAAFI canteen. His reward would be a cup of 'char' and a 'wad' (bun) from his pals after he escaped the parade.

**We** developed getting into trouble into a fine art, not that trouble was difficult to find. (Later, on Man-Service, I found that ex-boys [known as 'Badgies'], had a reputation for being crafty and knowing all the wangles). The slightest misdemeanour would result in seven days 'confined to barracks' (colloquially known as CB, or 'jankers'). Every room had it's 'jankers king'. Those on CB had to report to the Guard Room each morning before the last note of Reveille was sounded, late attendance being viewed very seriously. Then, in the evening, after our normal duties were finished, there would be the first bugle call for 'Defaulters'. All those on CB would race to the Guard Room where they were inspected. Then the lucky few would be selected for various jobs such as cookhouse fatigues, where you might be fortunate enough to be on cleaning tables and benches, or scrubbing floors, or cleaning the myriad pots, pans and equipment. Or you might get the really filthy job of cleaning the grease traps. Nevertheless, there was always the possibility of scrounging food on cookhouse duty. Other defaulters would be allocated cleaning offices or generally cleaning the Camp, cutting grass (often with the knife from your 'eating irons'), painting, (hence the saying "If it moves, salute it, - if it doesn't, paint it"). Finally there were the unfortunates who missed out on this gamble. They would be dismissed with orders to return in a certain time, perhaps in PT kit, next time it might be 'Walking-out Dress', and after that Field Service Marching Order, and this carried on until 'lights-out', when LAST POST was played. Each time they paraded they were thoroughly inspected and any faults resulted in a 'charge' (meaning Company Orders next day) and would generally mean another seven days CB to be added to those as yet to be served. These inspections were not just a formality - every piece of kit was checked, including the back of cap badges and belt buckles. Every item carried on FSMO was turned out and had to be complete as laid down (i.e. the water bottle had to be filled with fresh water, spare socks [darned if necessary] , toothpaste, soap, all had to be there). And woe betide anyone with anything other than a respirator, anti-dim cream and anti-gas ointment in his respirator case (this being the hiding place for cigarettes for those who smoked, quite illegally due to their age).

**Marching** back to our barrack rooms, from the workshops after a day's work, we had the pleasure of military marches being played over the camp loud-speakers, accompanied by our Boy NCOs calling out "Left, Right, Left". But we had developed a march where although there was no discernible file out of step, nevertheless, the rear of the column was on "Right" when the front was on "Left". This generally led to ten minutes 'square-bashing' before we were dismissed. One hot summer afternoon we had been on an

official visit to the swimming pool, which was a short distance from the camp. As we were being marched back to camp we foolishly played up a bit and the heat must have frazzled tempers. When we got back to camp we were ordered to get into Field Service Marching Order and parade again. When we were on parade we were ordered to put on our respirators, steel helmets and gas capes (a long, oil-skin type coverall, like a Turkish bath). After a quarter of an hour's drill, in this dress, in the hot sun, we would have turned the swimming pool into steam if we could have jumped into it then. When this punishment drill ended it was a race to our barrack rooms, change, a quick wash, then parade for tea. Incidentally, all meals were classified as a parade and had to be attended unless specifically excused. As soon as I finished tea it was back to my room again, changed into 'walking out dress' (i.e. Service Dress, white belt and peaked cap), then a two mile walk to Sedbury to meet my girl friend. We then spent the evening walking around the lanes until it was time for me to make the two mile trek back to camp.

**Getting** a Pass to go out of camp was only the beginning of an ordeal designed to spoil your 'free' time. On arrival at the Guard Room, to book out, first you had to stand rigidly to attention in front of the desk and shout out your number, rank and name. You then presented the Pass, which would be inspected as if the Provost had never seen the like before. It was common then to have to undergo a thorough inspection by the Provost Sergeant, or one of his Regimental Police. Back of cap badge and belt buckle inspected, chin strap of cap inspected to ensure that the back part of the strap (which couldn't be seen) was polished. Boots inspected (no shoes for us those days - clothing coupons were needed for them), to ensure that the requisite number of studs were on the sole (thirteen). If there was any excuse to do so you were sent back to your room to rectify the 'fault', which meant that you missed the bus into town and, consequently lost an hour of your precious pass.

**Having** reached town you still weren't free. Regimental Police patrolled the town and could order you back to camp if you infringed any of the rules. In the cinemas we were permitted to remove our 'headdress' but, in the interval, when the lights came on, the Regt Police walked along the aisles and woe betide you if you had unfastened the two hooks on the collar of your tunic.

**So** far I haven't mentioned the handsome remuneration we were paid. This was the enormous sum of 11d per day (the equivalent of four and a half pence now). On our first four pay days we were paid 2s (ten pence), the 'remainder being kept (after deductions for Barrack Damages) to pay us the day before we eventually would go home on leave. A form of compulsory saving. This 2s we were paid we spent riotously in the NAAFI, buying soap, toothpaste, boot polish, Brasso and other exotic items, such as char and wads. Of course after four weeks things did get better - we were paid 2/6d (twelve and a half pence) of our hard earned money, however, we now had to buy green Blanco for our webbing equipment and white Blanco for our 'walking-out' and ceremonial belt. As the bus fare into Chepstow was 4d (one and a half pence) it was as well that we were not allowed out of camp at that time.