

Diss Family History Group



My Story: A Diss Boy

Bernard Thorndyke

© Bernard Thorndyke and D.F.H.G., 2025

**The cover picture is of a
B-17 Flying Fortress**

Part 1: The Early Years

I was born in a cottage in Tavern Lane, off Victoria Road. My mother and father were Mabel Doris Garland and Charles William Thorndyke who married in 1934 at Oakley Church and we went to live with my grandfather John Thorndyke. I was the firstborn grandchild so was spoilt from the start.

When I was one year old we moved to 93 Victoria Road, a large house with lounge, dining room, three bedrooms, box room, kitchen with a copper and a range for cooking. At first there was gas lighting and mother had a gas cooker fitted. We had a flush toilet in the yard and also a shed. Life was not bad. Before WW2 we had some electric lights and 15 amp plugs in the downstairs rooms and kitchen; this was better all round.

[1939 National Registration: 93 Victoria Road, Diss. Residents: Charles W Thorndyke (b. 16 Oct 1908, baker and confectioner), Mabel D Thorndyke (b. ?? Sept ????, unpaid domestic duties), officially closed record (presumably Bernard), John A Thorndyke (b. 11 May 1939, under school age), John Thorndyke (22 Nov 1866, widower, farm labourer).]

In 1939 my brother John was born. It was nice to have a brother but later we used to fight and argue as we grew up into our teens. Before the war I had an Aunt Lily, who used to come and stay with us and bring me toys; clockwork train, clockwork aeroplane with folding wings, and many others.

During the war my mother, brother and I went by train to Dovercourt near Harwich to stay with Aunt Lily for a week. Being wartime there were barrage balloons and guns everywhere and the sirens used to

sound. I can't remember what we used to do or go into the shelters. The river was full of ships and there was a seaplane base at Felixstowe, the other side of the river. I had another aunt who lived there but that is another story.

I started my schooldays during the war years, in September 1941, aged five years old. My mother took me to school for the first two weeks and then I was walking to school by myself. There was not much traffic on the roads as the Yanks had not arrived. There were still horse and carts and some army lorries, but few cars. In those days we played ball in the road. Victoria Road was smooth and fleet with wide paths each side with telegraph and electric poles on south side. All the lanes were there in those days, Vincles, Station Road, Tavern Lane, Maltings Lane, Waveney Lane, Rose Lane, and Mission Road. Many of the houses there today not built then. There were two farms on the road, Champneys and the Court. Several industries, foundry, farm machinery works, clothing factory, maltings and several shops were at the top end. There were four pubs in length of road.

I cannot remember much about when I was in the infant class but one of my teachers was Miss Ling, who lived to a very old age after retiring. This was war time and there were not many men teachers, only ones who were too old to serve in the forces.

At school I got on well with the work and had a good schooling which was at the Diss Council School in the causeway between Victoria Road and Chapel Street. Infants first then junior, finishing top classes where my teachers were Mr Mason and headmaster Mr Mowle. Sometimes a retired master Mr Cushing would come to teach us art and crafts plus local history.

In the top classes I did well, passed exams to go to grammar school but did not go but went there for woodwork and later to work in gym and PT with Mr Right. I did well each year, exams in middle of year, at Xmas I always got a prize for good progress which was a book. I was not much good at sport but I liked cross country running at which I did well. We ran from grammar school to north of Diss Heywood and Burston road and fields. In class I sometimes finished my work early and the teacher asked me to help others who were a bit slow to learn.

When I was about 15 I changed schools and went to a school where we joined girls in class. It was in huts on Rectory Meadow. There were three of them, A, B and C. I was in A with Mr Denny where I did well again, passed exams to go to Wymondham College and Norwich Tech but did not go as my parents could not pay the costs, but this did not stop me in life. I left school with Grade 6 Grammar School ratings.

When I was growing up I enjoyed life. Although there was a war on I was free to do many things children cannot do today. I went where I wished without any harm, climbing trees, making a bow and arrows, having a catapult and generally doing as I wished. I had a good home, bed, three meals a day and clothing – what more could I want. The notes below relate to my family members who have a connection to the Lophams.

Part 2: Growing Up

At the age of 6 or 7 I could go wherever I liked. You did not have to worry about anything. Over fields, down lanes, onto Stuston Common, over into a piece of land at the back to Victoria Road near Palgrave which you got to over the Lows off Victoria Road. This was the other side of River Waveney. I spent many happy hours in these places bird watching and nest finding.

One day when we were on the common some soldiers gave us a ride on a Bren gun carrier over the common where they trained. We also saw a German H111 flying low across the common. The crew waved to us, but it was shot down near Beccles or Bungay I heard in later years.

One morning early when I was still in bed I heard a very loud rattling sound. When I went out to school there were bullet cases and bullets laying all the way along south side of Victoria Road and some of the poles had pieces split out of them. A fighter had chased a German plane down the road towards the west. I do not know what happened to it.

I watched the American planes, flying about especially in mornings and afternoons. Sometimes at night it was a bit frightening. When sirens sounded we went down the shelter under the stairs. Some bombs were dropped at Palgrave near the railway bridge. The shock waves came to cellar walls and frightened my mother who then said we were not going down there again. So the next time we went under the dining table in the room downstairs.

During the war years we had soldiers who came to lodge in the front bedroom and box room. Another time we had a family of three

evacuees who lived in half the house and shared the kitchen. After the war a man from Norwich came to lodge with us who was part of government labour movement. He was a welder at the engineering works near us, and he went home at weekends. My parents must have received payments for lodgings.

Again, during the war my grandmother Garland used to have me to stay with her during the school holidays at Oakley, where she lived in a cottage on the road to Hoxon. I had lots of fun when I was there, fishing in the river, swimming, going on farms, especially at harvest times. When I was a bit older I used to help a dairyman milk cows and take churns to be collected at the top of drive. Upper Oakley Park Farm, I loved it. I could catch large bream which grandmother would clean and grill for me to eat.

Once or twice I walked up to Thorpe Abbots Airfield to see BM Forts being prepared to fly missions, saw them change engines with an A Frame. It was a good time. During the war at Christmas the Americans gave local children a party. They picked us up in lorries and took us to the bases where we had fun playing games. There was ice cream, fruit, chocolate, cakes, sweets, with which we filled our pockets to come home. I had a lovely time growing up and feel sorry for children today.

I stayed with my grandmother every summer until I was 15 years old. On the Friday when I finished school she was waiting for me. I took my little case with clothes in and walked with her to Oakley to stay for six weeks. My mum was always surprised how much I had grown when I came home in September to start school again, but it was the way that I got new clothes to start school. I was always well dressed to go back to school.

Diss was completely different in those days. When I was about 14 or 15 years old I knew where everybody lived in Diss and their names. The only housing estate after the war was Uplands Way. Some council houses were built in the thirties, Stanley Road, Sunnyside Road and Frenze Road, and some houses were built on Roydon High Road and Louies Lane. The countryside almost came up to the town.

Diss Railway Station seemed to be in the middle of nowhere. One place I remember was the gasworks on Victoria Road. When I was young I went there with a sack to get some coke to help with the fire in wintertime. You could also buy creosote for treatment of wood, all coming from making the gas used in the town.

One of the things I nearly forgot was the time when I went to Norfolk & Norwich Hospital about my eye. When I was four a turn appeared in my right eye and in the war years I had to go to Norfolk & Norwich Hospital at least once a year but in the end I had an operation to put it straight when I was nine years old.

My mother took me by train from Diss to Norwich and we walked from there to the Hospital as it was wartime and Norwich was bombed in its centre. We sometimes had to go different ways to the Hospital as streets were blocked but my mother knew which way to go as she had worked in Chapelfields Norwich before she was married. After my visit to the Hospital we went to my aunts for a cup of tea. She lived in Chapelfields and was my dad's sister. Then back to the train and return to Diss. The trains were always different. One time the seats in the carriages were slats, that was how old they were during the war. We also stopped at every station on the way to Norwich, in all it used to take about an hour in time.

Part 3: Seeing life

While at school we went on outings and visits to companies and places. This was done to interest us in local areas and what was there in business.

One was the factory and stores of Albright Bros. who also made brooms, brushes and door mats. The brooms and brushes were made from alder wood. The wood came from local grown alder trees growing in woods, the bristle came from all over the world. The mats were made from coconut shell fibres and woven into mats to use as door mats, which are still used today. They also had a large store for carpets of which there was all sorts and rolls, some of the best in the country. They also did a carpet fitting service in the area.

The other large firm in Diss was Youngs Foundry and horse shoeing business. Here they made all sorts of things by moulding. They had a large furnace to melt the iron and scrap metal, then pour it into moulds. When they were cold they were taken out and cleaned up. One item they made was fire grates for houses. They had several forges where horseshoes were made and horses were shod. Other ironwork was also made for farm machinery. The other job undertaken here was fitting iron rims to wood wheels. There was a special plate which this was done on, the wheel placed on the plate, then the hot iron rim fitted, then cooled by throwing buckets of cold water over to make it shrink and tighten all the joints in the wheel.

The other works manufactured farm machinery such as seed drills, threshing machines, binders to cut corn and assemble the Youngs ploughing machine parts made at the foundry. They also made wagons, tumbrels and carts. Later in life, I got to know one of the carpenters

(Mr Base) who knew how to make a drill or threshing machine from his head and all the measures of materials. We visited both of these works as part of our education.

We also paid a visit to the fishing port at Great Yarmouth with Mr Mason, a teacher. We all assembled at Diss Station and went on a train to Norwich, then changed for train to Yarmouth, then walked down the quay to the ships.

There were many ships on the river. You could walk across the river from one side to the other on the ships. We saw them unloading the boats onto the quay and taken to women who cleaned and gutted fish very fast into barrels with salt to export. Other fish were opened and taken to the smokehouse to make kippers. Before we came home they filled a bag which we had each taken with us with a pair of kippers. You can imagine what the train smelt like on the way home. We ate our sandwiches with smelly hands. I have a photo of those on the trip including the teacher. It was a great day out and mother liked the fresh fish which we ate the next day.

When I was 11 it was made that I could take communion at church where my mother used to take me. Also I was a server to the priest in the church until I was 18 years of age. I had to learn which robes to get out for him to wear for the day's requirement.

Part 4: Going to work

When I was 15 I started work as an apprentice in the painting and decorating trade with a Diss firm called A. A. Hales. To start with I still did my paper round in the morning, though my wages were £2 a week for 56 hours work. We started at 8 o'clock in the morning wherever we were working – in Diss or in the countryside -nine hours a day and five hours on Saturday morning, rain or sunshine. Our workshops were down the side of Larter & Fords in Easto's Yard, behind the fish shop. We had a paint shop, wood workshop and glass store. They taught me painting, wallpaper hanging, wood staining and gilding with gold leaf. I learned my work quickly and by the time I was 18 I could do most of the jobs and I was asked if I wished to learn woodwork which I did with L. Stolberge. He was very good. He could do jobs in painting, paperhanging and woodwork. We also did work with plumbing and learned to use copper pipe. What we did was all the best work for the firm specially in large country houses where sometimes a room would take a month.

In the workshop on Victoria Road, where 121 Computers is now, we made and repaired windows, doors, made cabinets, and also fitted out shops before they opened for business. We made them in the workshop then they were taken by van to the shop where we fitted them in place.. Mr Stolberge and I did all the best top quality decorating work for the firm and did decorating in some big houses in the area with special wallpaper.

In those days we went everywhere on bikes, morning and night. Sometimes when I was an apprentice, a plumber used to put in central heating in a house for the firm of Hales and I would go and help taking up floorboards to put pipes under. I learnt a lot from him about

plumbing, sometimes not getting home until one in the morning, then had to go to work again at 8 a.m. next morning, but I got paid for it. He used to tell my boss how many hours I did “extra pay”.

The council opened the swimming pool when I was a teenager, so I went along and learned to swim. When I had finished work some evenings in summer I used to swim for about an hour then go for a ten-mile cycle ride to keep me fit. Before I left school I joined the Youth Club in the Church Hall at the bottom of Mere Street, where I played cards, learnt to play chess and ballroom dancing with proper instruction. Later on a gang of us, boys and girls, cycled to dances in local village halls, Diss Corn Hall and the King’s Head dance hall. We had great fun together but kept out of trouble.

I did 7 years as an apprentice and left the firm in 1960 to work for a firm which built houses and bungalows from ground upwards to learn how to build a property and learn more about woodwork (to put roofs on). This firm built houses and bungalows complete. One partner in the company, who was a bricklayer by trade, taught me how to set out ground for the footings to start a building, the other partner was a carpenter and taught me how to build the roof work and all other woodwork jobs in completing the property. I learnt a great deal about the trade with this firm.

After about two years the partnership broke up but I stayed working with the carpenter for 10 years. I worked with him building roofs on properties and other woodwork jobs, e.g. new kitchens for people. Sometimes I went with a bricklayer Albert to put a bathroom and sewage system into a cottage in the countryside. We did all the work between us, and it took about a week’s work. Sometimes this included a back boiler fire to heat the water. This made life better for those living there. Later I was given the responsibility of looking after

modernising council houses for Suffolk Council. There would be a team of about 5 or 6 people of different trades . I was given the job of looking after the job from start to finish and a profit on the price of work when completed.

Things changed in the building trade and some of the work was given out to self-employed people but this sometimes did not work out well. Also my boss took on another partner which I could see was going wrong. So I packed the building trade up and went to work for Omar Homes, a new business in Diss.

I stayed in the building trade until 1970. I got fed up with the contract labour working in the building trade and left the business to work in mobile home firm Omar Mobile Homes, where I worked for nearly 29 ½ years. I had a very good job, nearly all the time as manager or supervisor and left in 1970 with redundancy payment. Omar Homes closed and a supermarket was built on the site. I went on government courses on how to start my own business. For this I was given a payment of £34 per week. After five months rest I started my own business until I retired when I was 76 years old. In the building trade I did painting and decorating, woodwork and some plumbing, fitting kitchen and bedroom units, plus electrics. My first job was to make a large patio and build a six foot wall in someone's back garden. It was a good start. I worked mostly by myself but sometimes with other tradesmen.

When I was an apprentice, every job was done by hand, cleaning down to decorate, sanding to smooth for repaint, all high work was using ladders and boards on trestles. As I was not scared of heights I was always sent up high on ladders to work on gutters and fascia boards on properties. I was also taught how to cut glass by the boss, who gave me a special cutter and told me to take care of it and let nobody else use

it. We used to cut up a lot of glass sheets which were 6ft x 4 ft and size 1/8th to 1/4" thick. The glass loft was upstairs in the workshop so all deliveries had to be passed up through some double doors by hand (not easy). I never recall breaking one, we had to wear gloves so the edge did not cut our hands.

During the 1960s electric tools started to appear, drills to use by hand, mortice cutters, planers and routers for mouldings, woodwork became a bit easier and also fixing items using screws and drilling. Today we have electric tools for all sorts of jobs.

When working to learn woodwork we made new doors, new windows, cupboards and I once made a new sash window. One of the jobs made in the workshop was a new rood screen for Gissing church in English oak. Mr Stromberg made all mouldings and we cut all joints by hand. It is still there today. I do not know how much it cost. One other job we did was go and work for Mr Boggis who made and rebuilt organs in churches in his workshop. Our work was to stain and varnish the wood panels to make them look like oak. It was nice work.

My own business went very well. It started in March 1999 and I was 75 years old when it was closed on the advice of the accountant. I had plenty of work and at times as much as 18 months work waiting to be carried out. There were two bakeries which I did work for, cleaning and keeping up to standard. I also did work for S.N.D.C. in house maintenance and decorating and for a hotel in Diss as well as many private properties. I never had to look for work or advertise; it was the principles on which I did my work that gave me this.

Because I had a good business I had an accountancy firm do my books once a year to pay my taxes. I did not finish the business until I was about 75 years old but after 65 years old gradually ran it down, then

retired properly. I have had a good life in the building trade also the benefits of good health. In my work I always tried to do a good job and working for myself charging a reasonable price for my work. This reputation followed me all my life.

Part 5: Flying!

One item of interest for a large part of my life was aviation. This probably started during the Second World War when I was about 6 or 7 years of age. I used to watch the American planes form up to go on their missions. There were large amounts of aircraft - B17s and B24s - these would form up on the formation aircraft which was brightly coloured. Then they would head off and formation planes would go back to base. Later in the day they came back but not always together as some were damaged. We had several crash in the area.

One Sunday my dad and mum took us to see where a B17 had crashed at Brome at the junction of the Eye road. It was landing at Brome when it hit the top of oak trees beside the A140 before Brome Swan. The tail snapped off with the tail gunner inside, he was the only one who survived. The rest of the plane dived onto the ground near the vee in the road and blew up, killing the rest of the crew, it blew all the windows out of the pub and a telephone box across the road. Even to this day you can see where the tops of trees are flat shaped.

There were other crashes; at the back of Scole Lodge, Darrow Hill, on a road to Shelfanger, two collided at the back of Roydon, one engine finished up in the wash house of council houses in Factory Lane, and many others. Planes returning from missions were often shot up and damaged.

I attended woodwork classes at the grammar school in Shelfanger road. At break time when we were outside a plane would come over and some of the boys would say it was a Mk I or II fighter. This got me to wonder and I would ask them how they could tell and they explained to me, This got me more interested so I began to study

planes more and bought my first Observer Book of Aircraft. Through the years this has grown into a sincere hobby which has lasted to the present day.

In about 1961 I passed my driving test and bought a car. I started to travel all over the country to airbases to see the planes and also to air shows. One of the best was Mildenhall held once a year.

I spent time as a member of the Royal Observer Corps. This was during the cold war period in history. I decided to do this after failing to go in the Royal Airforce as a jet engineer due to a problem with my eye. I had already passed all the exams for this. I joined the Corps in about 1960/61 on the Diss Post K3, which was down a lane off Shelfanger Road. At the time it still had the old wartime hut and above ground post with all instruments used during the Second World War and the members during airforce exercises. After about two years this was finished and the full nuclear roll took place. We still were not able to use the underground post as it was flooded with water from a leak in concrete walls

After a few years I became Leading Observer on the post and got in touch with our Group HQ concerning this problem. The leak was sealed and after a time, when dried out, it was fitted out for use and we moved in. The post had bunk beds, cupboards, shelves and toilet. Also cooking facilities and pack rations, water containers. Jerry cans in which the water had to be changed every few months, it was also fitted with all the instruments we used during exercises or if the real thing happened (God help us).

In time I became Chief Observer in charge of the post. At one time there were 18 members on the post so there was no trouble to man

the post on exercises. You always had to have two members on duty, ometimes three members, for a minimum of two hours.

When I first joined I had the chance to go to the Ministry of Defence School at Essingwold in Yorkshire for ten days where I learned all about nuclear weapons and effects of radiation. It was frightening and if a war started all the world would be affected and we would be wiped out. During my service I went on courses to train as an instructor and became a fully trained RAF instructor for which I received a certificate and could instruct on all instruments use by the Corps.

I served until we were stood down at Wymondham Abbey in 1991. During my service I received 12 year medal with 12 year clasp for my service time - 30 years.

When I was in the Corps, each year, usually in March, we were required to take a test which was in most cases in a village hall or cinema. It consisted of aircraft slides shown on a screen and a test paper based on procedures and instruments and was marked in percentages.

This also decided which was the best post in Group No.6, my post won it once but we always got good marks at Diss. The other item which you could acquire was a blue or red spitfire badge to wear on your arm to say you had got high marks. You had to get five blue for a red one, this meant over 95% every time.

Another interest in my life has been military photography. I have taken thousands of pictures, slides and photos . I am also interested in railway things like the old steam engines and modern day railways and I belong to the District Model Railway Society. I have two layouts of my own in 00 size, these I have constructed myself and thoroughly enjoyed

but it is getting very expensive if you are not careful. I have great collections and still go on Wednesday night to Shelfanger Village Hall where we have our meetings (good fun relaxing). I enjoy making my layouts and now work with a friend on a layout at the Club and it is nice to see it working properly.

Part 6: And so

My father worked at the sawmill at the bottom of Waveney Road, off Victoria Road. We lived at 93 Victoria Road. The sawmill used to cut up English home grown timber which Mr. Stevens (the sawmill owner) purchased, some from local houses. There was a large stack of timber in the yard in the form of tree trunks, some long, others short, down to about 8ft in length.

My father's job during the week was to cut these trees into planks which were 2in to 12in thick. Then they would be stored in a large shed to dry and season. He used a horizontal bench on which the trees were placed, which was propelled through the saw as it cut up the trees. It was drawn by a belt system of pulleys from a stationary oil engine in another building.

When I was about 12 or 13 years old my father asked me if I would like a Saturday job down at the mill which I agreed to. On Saturdays if the weather was OK the planks were cut up into posts and rails for fencing and gate posts on a rack bench circular saw with a blade about 3ft across. This was run by a belt from a Burrell steam engine on to pulleys. My job on a Saturday was to look after the steam engine by keeping the fire going for pressure of about 200 lbs in the boiler all day. This was done with wood logs. I also brought planks from the store to the saw, then took timber back to store on a flat cart. All this had to be stacked so air passed through. Many of the planks were cut into posts 3 x 3, 4 x 4, 6 x 6 and 12 x 12, about 6 to 8 or 9ft long for gates and fences. Also 2 or 3 x ½ rails to ten feet long. Nothing from the planks was wasted, scrap cut into firewood logs and sold in bags or sacks. In another workshop there was some woodworking machinery with a circular saw, planning machine and a band saw.

When I started woodwork lessons at school my father taught me how to use them properly. When I required some wood to make something at school I would ask my father for this and then help myself to what I wanted. I could cut the wood and prepare it for my requirement, then take it to school to work with - e.g. coffee table, bedside cabinet, bread board and cutting board.

When the top was taken off the windmill it was made into an area you could walk on with an entrance hatch in the middle and a wall round it about 3ft high. Sometimes I would climb the stairs and ladder onto this roof and watch the trains go past on the railway. When there were aeroplanes flying along the railway at low level sometimes as low as 150ft a bit scary when near the mill top. One I remember was a Supermarine Swift taking photos from the air.

All the machines worked by pulleys and bolts from an oil engine in another building. This had a large fly wheel with a belt attached. This wheel was used to start the engine by spinning by foot and hands. You had to be very careful, this powered all machines in the mill.

After my father finished at the mill he went to work at Jewsons in Diss as a yardman until he retired at 65 years old. He lived until he was 81 years old.

In January 1958 I got married to Eileen Tooke from Taverham and we did a cottage repair at Walcot Green, Diss and lived there until 1960 when we received a new council house at Skelton Road, Diss. In 1978 my wife left me and the two children (girls). I got a divorce but got everything at court so I stayed living there.

Then I married Ivy and she was the best wife a man could have. We had a happy life together until she died in 2002 aged 50.

My wife and I used to go with South Norfolk Band to Holland and Germany, where I still have lots of friends. We used to help run this Band and raise funds. My wife ran raffles, the tuck shop on Tuesday evenings and raffles at concerts, and I used to transport all the gear and instruments to concerts and also help to set up the Band. My payment was seeing young children come into the Band and grow up good citizens. Sometimes I did a woodwork project for a person which to me was like a hobby and I enjoyed it.

In later years I became a Freemason which I enjoy, raising in rank to become an officer in all degrees to which I belong, which is an enjoyment and I meet many people from other Lodges.

I had a lovely teenage time when I was growing up, all a boy could wish for, a good home and family, never hungry and plenty to occupy my time. I have been very lucky in life, both in health and keeping myself fit but there have also been times when life was not so good but I got through it and came out OK with many experiences and things that have happened. It has been a good life and may there be more to come.

This story has been written for inclusion on the Diss Family History Group's webpages.

If anyone has any information that could be added to this story and are willing to share it, please make contact. Any additions will be fully acknowledged.

No part of this document can be reproduced with obtaining the consent of the author.

© Bernard Thorndyke and D.F.H.G., 2025