



Pat and Bill Spicer

**They'd faced the Blitz and now the girls of the East End were ready to put on a show to rival Hollywood**



Nancy Beaton's wedding



# The brides who beat Hitler

**T**he bride and groom posed under the archway of a beautifully designed backdrop, as the photographer arranged extra tulle around the bottom of the bride's dress.

Bill Spicer had taken to calling his bride, Pat, his 'pocket Venus'.

But on this day, Pat said: 'I feel like a movie star.'

With her 22-inch waist, flowing satin gown and wavy hair, she looked the part of a 1930s starlet.

But this wasn't Hollywood. This was impoverished post-war East London. The year was 1948 and Pat had married barber Bill.

There was so much hardship at the time that people craved escapism.

Couples like Pat and Bill employed the services of East End photographer Boris Bennett to bring a touch of silver-screen style to their wedding photos.

Eager onlookers often gathered outside Boris's studio to catch a glimpse of the brides he photographed, and dressmakers waited with sketchbooks in hand.

Pat's family had saved for her wedding for years and she felt stunning in her gown with its sweetheart neckline, cathedral sleeves and flute train and a lovers' knot embroidered into her veil.

Her dressmaker had sewn a strand of her hair into the seam, as this was her signature finish.

The Thirties and Forties were the Golden Age of vibrant community weddings and after Pat and Bill's photos were taken, the couple made their way to a little terraced house, where Bill's mum pulled out a trestle table and served guests a wedding breakfast of mashed potatoes, cold roast beef and beetroot.

Glamorous brides were a reaction

to the horrors of war. But the Twenties had seen the birth of the movie star, and working-class girls now aspired to look like Joan Crawford or Greta Garbo — even if just for the one day of their wedding.

When it came to inspiration for their wedding dress, many young women looked to society girls such as Nancy Beaton. Her wedding to Sir Hugh Smiley, in January 1933 at St Margaret's Church, Westminster, London, had made news headlines.

Crowds had lined the streets to catch the beauty of her silk dress, flowing veil and procession of bridesmaids, who wore dresses wrapped in a sash of flowers.

Renee Stack was a normal bride with

Hollywood good looks, and her story of romance could have come straight from a movie. She met her husband Brian at a dance, when he'd just returned from serving with the 7th Armoured Division, the famous 'Desert Rats'.

Brian walked over to her and said: 'I'm going to marry you.'

It was love at first sight for them both. But Renee's strict Jewish mother wasn't so easily swept up in

the romance.

She told her daughter: 'Wait and see what he makes of himself first.'

Brian showed his commitment. Over the next three years he learnt Hebrew. Then he converted to Judaism so he could marry Renee.

The couple had no money, so Brian borrowed a suit and Renee's friend Edie made her a beautiful pale-blue silk crepe wedding dress. Renee had no money to pay Edie.

But her friend said: 'It's my wedding gift to you.'

Renee did her own hair and make-up and the whole family chipped in to pay for the couple's wedding portrait.

In later years wedding guests would snap selfies with the bride,



Renee and her wedding photo



Joe and Henrietta Keeper

but in 1948 few people had a camera. So to own a beautiful wedding photograph was a badge of honour.

Photographer William Whiffin believed everyone in his East End community, no matter how poor, had the right to own a studio portrait. To help those who couldn't afford one, he ran clubs where members paid an amount each week so they could save up for their wedding portrait.

Renee and Brian married on a shoestring, but in the dreamy

lighting of their wedding photo they looked like Hollywood royalty — Rita Hayworth and Clark Gable. Renee felt so happy and aged just 21 she had her whole life to look forward to.

Henrietta Keeper was another show-stopping 1940s bride. During the Blitz, the vivacious blonde and her sisters entertained people sleeping in an underground shelter by singing harmonies to drown out the sound of bombs.

After the war, she caught the eye of a handsome coal-delivery man, Joe Keeper.

He'd shout out to her from his horse-drawn cart: 'Hello, curly!'

Every day he threw down an orange for her and delivered free coal to her mum to keep her sweet. Henrietta was impressed by Joe's strength.

She told friends: 'He's so strong

he can carry a two-hundredweight (102kg) sack of coal up stairs on his back with ease.'

When the couple married, Henrietta wore a lace dress made by a friend, and pearls around her neck.

People didn't give two hoots for all the trappings that brides in later years came to obsess over. Most brides, like Henrietta, did their own hair and make-up.

Joe proved himself to be a good provider and the couple went on to have three children and spent 50 happy years together before Joe passed away.

In the Forties weddings were about love, commitment and family, not sugared almonds and selfies.

Favours, canapés, hen-dos and foreign honeymoons were unheard of. The most young newlyweds hoped for was a few days by the seaside.

Weddings were community events that sometimes lasted over several days or even weeks.

Pianos were a treasured musical instrument and it wasn't unheard of for people to take the window off their house in order to get a piano out on to the street so everyone could enjoy the lively celebrations.

When Edith Myers's cousin Bertie married a local girl named

Bertha, the party went on for three weeks.

At least three pianos were rolled out on to the cobbled streets, while Edith's dad played accordion and her mum sang.

Everyone's talents were called upon and the street was alive with the sound of music and merriment. Strangers were welcome to join in the celebrations and everyone from the neighbourhood brought something to the party. What little they had, they contributed.

It was important that no one felt left out. Edith's family made sure to include vulnerable members of the community in the celebrations, because that's how it was back then. People cared for one another through good times and bad.

Decades later, Edith takes time to muse over family wedding portraits. She finds the photographs, and the innocence that shines through them, spellbinding.

These are times long-gone, but she can lose herself in the old pictures, if only for a little while.



These stories were part of Kate Thompson's research for her novel *The Wedding Girls*, published by Pan Macmillan. *The Wedding Girls* goes on sale on 9 March, priced £6.99.