

**Written by Audrey Brockman**

### **Evacuation June 1940 to June 1945**

The year is 1940, I can remember starting school with my twin brother at Thornton Road Infants School, Croydon. Our enrolment date was June 3<sup>rd</sup> – a few weeks later on June 14<sup>th</sup> we were evacuated with others from our school to Bideford in North Devon.

I can remember vividly being taken by coach to a main line railway station, our only luggage a small case and a gas mask over our shoulder. I cannot remember much about the actual journey, I cannot even remember if my Mother was there to see us off but I do remember wearing a large luggage label and that my brother wore a brown school cap. The journey was a long one, I can remember a stop at a large station and people giving us drinks and biscuits. Possibly it was Exeter.

By the time we arrived in Bideford it was quite late in the evening, we were taken to a hall in the town where people were waiting to choose an evacuee. I do not think that there was much in the way of organisation, anyone with a spare room was asked to accept a child or children into their home. It was very late, we were very tired and confused, it seemed that no one was prepared to take twins and the organisers were reluctant to separate us. A lady named Mary Hill offered to have us for a day or two until alternative accommodation could be found. She in fact gave us a home for over five years.

It was very bleak at first, she was often ill and was strict with us. She had one son of her own who was in his mid-thirties, he was an asthmatic who also had a deformed spine, so was not eligible for army service, it must have been very difficult for two middle aged people to suddenly be confronted with two five year old children to bring up. Mr Hill was a really nice man and often gave us little treats, he was good company and our favourite outing was a trip to his depot, he was a member of the ARP being too old to enlist in the forces. His depot was a small child's dream of interesting things to play with, tin hats, stirrup pumps, gas masks, hose pipes, what a time we used to have, we spent many happy hours with him, helping in our own way and keeping out of Mrs Hill's way.

Soon after our arrival in Bideford we were enrolled at the local Infants School which was attached to St Mary's Church. I can remember the building clearly, later on we were transferred to the Junior School, I well remember one teacher a Miss Foden who praised my needle work, a pair of blue knickers that I had made.

The dentist used to visit the school, I recall having a tooth filled, he used an old fashioned treadle drill which he operated using his foot. The filling cost 3d, he threw my three penny piece up into the air and said "Little Audrey laughed and laughed".

I made friends at the school, one was Margaret Nicholas and her sister Barbara, they lived in Lime Grove. We had quite a long walk to school each day, on our way we walked down Mignonette Walk, there we

used to see an old gentleman who used to sit in a little wooden hut in his garden, he used to grow conkers and apples in their season.

I remember clearly the school dinners, the helpers were very strict and would not allow any pudding until your first course was finished. I was not able to eat fat meat, I still cannot cope with it. Many lunch times I hid the nasty bits up my sleeve and threw them down the drain outside. I used to go back to the class room with gravy running down my arm.

One night there was great excitement as the laundry opposite our house was on fire. After that our favourite playground was the burnt out shell. It must have been very dangerous but I do not remember anyone reprimanding us for playing there. We also built dens in the rubbish tip, playing was un-supervised for hours on end.

The little girl next door was Gillian Taylor, I was very envious of her ringlets, my hair was completely straight and cut very short, just like Mrs Hill. The neighbour on the other side was Mrs Dark, she used to let my Mother lodge there on the few occasions that she was able to visit. Looking back I feel that my mother must have had some sort of disagreement with Mrs Hill because she never offered lodgings with us when she came, unlike my father who always stayed with us when he had leave and was able to visit. I can remember tickling his feet to wake him up in the morning. On one occasion we went to the railway station to meet him, we waited for ages and he didn't come, noses pressed against the side of the bridge between the two platforms. Suddenly someone clapped their hands behind us and there he was, we both threw ourselves at him for hugs, somehow we had missed him and he had returned to the station to find us. We used to raid his kit bag for chocolate buttons.

One day he came to see us wearing a different uniform, he had transferred to the Fleet Air Arm, that was the last time we saw him. After Christmas 1943 Sam and I were taken out for a walk by Mrs Wall who was also billeted at Raleigh View with her son Alan. She had to break the news to us that our father was dead.

I can remember her exact words as if it was yesterday, "Sam, Audrey, I have something to tell you, you haven't got a Daddy anymore". His death had occurred by drowning in the Cromarty Firth on September 19<sup>th</sup> 1943, we were not told until early January 1944. Now we understood why we had not heard from him at Christmas, nor did I ever get to know if he liked the scarf that I had patiently knitted for him, I have thought since that they probably only pretended to send it.

Many years later I was told by Mrs Wall that Mrs Hill kept saying that she was not well enough to break the news to us. My Mother was angry that we were not told, but why did she not come down to Devon to tell us herself? Looking back I realise that Mrs Hill was a very sad lady who took refuge from life's traumas in her ill health. It is difficult to recall my feelings at this time, no one seemed to treat us any different, Mrs Wall was extra kind to us, she lived in the same area of Croydon as us, her husband was in

the Army, she was able to accompany her son to Bideford. She remained a true friend until her death in the 1960s. I think it was not until our return to Croydon in 1945 our true loss was brought home to us.

We used to walk miles in those days, cars were few and far between, what cars there were ran on gas which was kept in a large balloon like contraption on the roof. The buses dragged a huge gas generator behind them. We used to walk from Bideford to Westward Ho about three miles across the fields and down lanes, in those days the fields were edged with hedges full of beautiful flowers. The beach was sectioned off with barbed wire and there were pill boxes everywhere but there was still a part of the beach where we could play in the rock pools.

At some stage in the earlier part of our stay, my sister Joan was transferred from her billet in Swanage to one in Bideford so that we could all be together. Unfortunately she had a series of very bad billets and we were not allowed to play with her, my mother took her back to Croydon in early 1943. I do recall though that she got into terrible trouble for losing her knickers on Westward Ho beach.

I was always very frightened of the gas geyser at Raleigh View, the house had no electricity and they used to put me in the bath with this thing hissing and spluttering, I was scared stiff of it, I am still very wary about water tanks, boilers and heaters of any kind. They also tried to make me eat tripe, many times I went without my meal altogether rather than eat the stuff. The 'seaweed' I did like, it was collected off the rocks, boiled then sold at the fishmongers from big white bowls. You ate it with fried bread or toast, it was full of iron and minerals so sadly lacking in our wartime diet. I also have a vague recollection of men leaning over the old bridge at certain times in the year, salmon fishing maybe.

Two people remain in my memory of those years, one was Miss Bateman or 'the Song Lady' as my brother and I used to call her. She lived in a little cottage in New Row above the town, I am not sure how she came into our lives but I have a feeling that my Mother used to lodge there when she came to see us. What intrigued us children was her toilet which was at the end of the garden and had no chain. She was a member of the Salvation Army, hence our name for her, she was a very kind soul and we spent many happy hours in her company. I have in my possession several old cards with Miss Bateman's name on them, I found them amongst my Mother's things when she died in 1991.

The second person who sticks in my memory was Mary Astor, although I did not know who it was at the time, she was making a speech in Victoria Park perched up on the fort where the cannons were, I can still see her in a long navy blue skirt and a large navy blue hat. I have since found out that she was at that time Liberal Candidate for Plymouth. Whenever we visited Victoria Park we went to find the 'monkey puzzle' tree, we called it 'our tree'.

Towards the end of the War the Americans arrived in the town. They had a supply depot at the bottom of our garden in Raleigh View. One week I was off from school with chicken pox, I took them out a large jug of tea, when they had finished they filled the jug with all their loose change, I felt like a millionaire.

We used to spend a lot of time making rafts which we would sail down the stream. One day an older boy nicknamed Lanky Long Legs jumped onto my raft. I was so frightened of him that I jumped into the water and got into terrible trouble for arriving home soaking wet. Another time we got into trouble was when Sam and I played truant from Sunday School, we went to play on the cannon at Chudleigh Fort, East of the Water. Our Sunday School teacher reported us to Mrs Hill.

One Autumn Mrs Wall took us to pick blackberries, we picked so many that they were piled high on a huge meat dish, we also went scrumping apples at the same place enabling Mrs Hill and Mrs Wall to make loads of jam. Everything possible was done to eke out the meagre rations of war time.

George, Mrs Hill's son married his Molly on our tenth birthday in 1945, they were both in their late thirties which seemed awfully old to me.

One Christmas time I was given a boy doll with a big red nose, I called him Pinocchio. We brought a few toys with us from home, one I can remember was a brown dog called Dusty Brown.

The house in Raleigh View was very gloomy, there was no electricity, only gas mantels which used to flare and splutter when they were lit. Sam and I used to take the accumulator for the radio to the dairy to be recharged, we carried it between us but I recall that it was quite heavy for two tots to manage. The room was full of large furniture, on the dining room fireplace was a large black marble clock with a vase at each end to match.

I can remember Sam sitting at the kitchen table having his knees dressed, all the photographs of Sam in Bideford he has bandages on his knees, I have a vivid memory of him with his head over the kitchen sink bleeding profusely after losing a tooth. I was so frightened, we were very close to each other, I could not bear the thought of him being ill. On looking back I think we must have been quite a handful for two middle aged people to cope with. We had a filthy habit of spitting on our bedroom wall, whose spit reached the bottom first was the winner!!

Very occasionally we went to the pictures, the Strand Cinema. The first film I ever saw was *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* we also saw the 'Penny Pictures' these were usually held on Saturday morning and were mainly silent films, Pearl White, Abbott and Costello, Laurel and Hardy and various cowboy films. When the projector broke down which it did quite often, we all used to 'boo' and 'hiss' and make a terrible noise. In the interval an usher used to come round and spray us all with a Flit gun of insect repellent, I don't think we were a very hygienic lot. I can remember catching head lice on several occasions and having my hair combed through with a fine tooth comb dipped in vinegar. There is a certain piece of music which to this day reminds me of our trips to the 'Penny Pictures'.

In April 1945 we were told that the war in Europe was at an end, we went racing upstairs to pack our few belongings, but in fact it was another two months before arrangements could be made to get us back to

our homes. We eventually arrived back in Croydon on June 26<sup>th</sup> 1945. Soon after we arrived back there were street parties to celebrate victory over the Japanese.

It was a very different London to the one which we left over five years before, I can remember feeling so frightened and insecure, my Mother being a war widow obliged to work full time, her pension in those days was £3.00 per week for herself and three children. We were left very much to our own devices, everything was so strange, I was scared of the bomb sites, the taped up windows and our new school. Luckily Sam and I were able to attend the same school for a while longer.

My elder sister had the job of getting us both up for school each morning as my Mother had to be at work by 7:30am. I well remember one particular morning, we had not been home for very long, I screamed and screamed not wanting to get up and go to school, in the end Joan had to go and fetch Mother home from work. She came up to the bedroom, gave me a good hiding and said "Don't you ever get me home from work again".

There were no support groups in those days to help families come to terms with five year splits and the loss of a parent through the casualties of war. I did not realise at the time but on looking back it must have been a traumatic time for Mr and Mrs Hill, we had gone to them as two five year old tots, they had given us a home for five years and more or less brought us up only to lose us again. They must have felt a terrible void in their lives made worse by the death of their only son soon after the war during an asthma attack. If the same thing had happened when my own two sons were tiny, no way would I have sent them away unaccompanied, but in 1940 circumstances were very different. In those days with the threat of real hostilities, the parents had very little choice. It is only recently that psychologists have started to study the effect that evacuation had on our lives, the feelings of inadequacy, lack of confidence, breakdown in relationships, especially with mothers.

Since joining the E.R.A I have found such a relief that I am not the only one to feel as I do, that all of us to a greater or lesser extent were affected for life by our experiences. It is good to talk about it now, to bring out into the open thoughts and emotions that have remained hidden for nearly 50 years.

I must add that I consider my brother and I were among the lucky ones. Mr and Mrs Hill give us a clean and stable home life for over five years, we were very happy with them and I think they must have been devastated when we had to return home.