FROM BROWNHILL TO PITCH HILL

The wartime history of two Catford schools
Profits from the sale of this booklet will be used for the preservation of the wartime murals.

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FROM BROWNHILL TO PITCH HILL

The wartime history of two Catford schools

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from material supplied by
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The memoirs of Harry Gell
Mike Burr
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The murals shown on pages 6 and 8 are still there in the original positions but are now in need of restoration and protection. They have been registered with The Imperial War Museum as War Memorials.

The Sayers Croft War Memorials Preservation Fund Committee has been set up to try to obtain the cost of preserving these unique examples of talents and teaching during the wartime years.

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BROWNHILL TO PITCH HILL

GENESIS - The beginning

The first time that aeroplanes had been used to drop bombs was during the 1914-1918 war. Later towns and cities had been bombed during the Spanish Civil War. During the rise of German military power in the 1930s there was great apprehension in government circles that bombs and poison gas could be dropped on British cities; so preparations were made. Subsequently between 1st and 4th September 1939 'Operation Pied Piper' was instituted and many thousands of schoolchildren were transported from cities to the countryside. Among these were three schools situated in a large three storey building in Brownhill Road, Catford, in South East London. They were Catford Central School for Boys, Brownhill Road Boys School and the Infants and Junior Departments.

EXODUS - The evacuation

"Look where you are going boy!" commanded the tall bearded schoolmaster to a startled lad who was just going to bump into a lamppost. The schoolboy was one of a long crocodile of 200 trooping their way to Catford railway station. They were wearing or carrying a variety of raincoats, rather long short trousers, Sunday best shoes and a royal blue school cap with a gold badge. Each carried a small case or bag and a gas mask in a cardboard case over one shoulder. It was Catford Central School for Boys and it was Saturday 2nd September 1939, they were being evacuated out of London to an unknown destination. Brownhill Road Senior Boys School had set off in the same fashion the day before. The Junior School followed on Monday 4th September. Another distinguishing mark was a tie-on label with name and school that was attached to every lad.

The final destination for all the Brownhill Road schools was Ashford in Kent. They were first taken to either the Old County Theatre Hall or the Girls Grammar School and there given a cup of tea and a bun. They were then sorted out into groups in charge of a Billeting Officer who then took them round the streets, knocking on doors to try to arrange accommodation. Evacuation from London was voluntary but the taking in of evacuees was compulsory, if you had the room to take them. Most people wanted girls, if it was the boys the smallest was picked first. The choice of billets was mainly luck. Some boys lived in poor conditions with elderly people, some were taken advantage of as cheap labour, others lived in a large house waited on by parlourmaids, but the majority were looked after by caring people.

War was declared at 11.00 am on Sunday 3rd September 1939. The sirens sounded shortly afterwards. The boys were both excited and scared -
Formed up in five Houses on the parade ground, ready for roll-call.
especially when confronted by an Air Raid Warden, wearing a steel helmet and a flapping gas cape shouting "TAKE COVER".

Schooling was severely limited. Schools in the town shared their space and time but books and materials were in short supply. Full use was made of a Salvation Army Hut in West Street. During winter it was heated by an old slow combustion stove. Lessons were frequently adjourned to allow the smoky fumes to disperse. Outside to play in the freezing cold before going back inside to get warm after the air had cleared. Nothing was made easier by the many feet of snow that fell that winter.

Church parade was a regular Sunday feature. It took up time on a Sunday and helped to keep control over the weekend. All boys were made to wear their school caps.

Ashford had many attractions. The large railway marshalling yards, the weekly cattle market, where the hides of cows could be thumped and the sheep's wool stroked. The railway line carrying express steam trains to the coast (ideal for noting the names of engines) and the River Stour passing through the town. The favourite areas for games were Bailey's Fields by the river and the Warren, a nearby hill covered in rabbit holes and bracken and a perfect place for hiding and tracking.

One day, in Bailey's Fields, there was a group of boys watching the passing goods trains, others playing a game of knockabout football and another half dozen down by the river. A lad rushed up and in an excited whisper said he'd seen a water otter down by the river. There was a quick sprint-dropping on all fours and a line of heads peering cautiously over the river bank - there - sitting regally on a log, was a black, slightly rusting kettle!

During the early months of the war the only enemy action was at sea and the boys gradually drifted back home until after six months only half of the original number remained. A temporary school was opened in Brownhill Road to cater for those that had returned.

Germany invaded Belgium and Holland on 10th May 1940. This meant that South East England was even more vulnerable to air attack and Ashford, with its railway yards was a likely target. Prepared plans were put into action. The senior boys schools were amalgamated and they moved out after five days.

THE PASSOVER - A new billet

The National Camps Corporation was set up in 1938 to build camps so that city children could be taken into the countryside and spend some of their time in a rural environment. Thirty two were built, many in the South of England.
At 4.00pm on Wednesday 15th May 1940 two hundred boys from Catford Central School and Browahill Road School marched into one of these camps. Sayers Croft Camp Ewhurst, near Cranleigh, Surrey.

The camp consisted of fourteen buildings. Five dormitories with adjacent toilet blocks. A school block with four classrooms. A craft block, assembly hall and a dining hall. There were separate buildings for the Headmaster, Camp Manager, camp staff and a fully equipped 'Sick Bay'. They were all bungalow type units constructed of Canadian Cedar with cedar shingle roofs.

The five dormitories were named after castles - Arundel, Caernarvon, Dover, Stirling and Windsor. Each housed forty boys in metal bunks, with a house master in a room at each end. The toilet and shower blocks were ten yards away, but there was one toilet inside - for night use only!

The five dormitories provided ready made teams for all the competitive events that were to take place.

The village of Ewhurst is fifteen miles south of Guildford. It sits at the foot of Coneyhurst Hill, known locally as Pitch Hill. There is a public house at one end, the church and village hall in the middle and the village green at the other end.

The camp was staffed mainly by local people, there was a group of housemaids from Wales but not many male staff. Two sewing maids took care of torn shirts and holes in socks. Sometimes a barber visited, but not as frequent as the headmaster would have liked.

Teachers were presented with a serious problem. They were now responsible for schoolboys twenty four hours a day - every day and none of them had boarding school experience. There would be no school holidays. After discussion it was agreed that every teacher would be on duty for eleven days out of fourteen, there would be some sessions off during that time but they would have to remain in camp. They took it in turns to be Orderly Officer for the day. The Orderly Officer would be in charge of the school side of the camp, see to the rising bell (Reveille!), be on duty during the meal-times, inspect and check all the site and act as Air Raid Warden. He would not, of course do any teaching that day. Two prefects were delegated each day to inspect the fire buckets, to check for tidiness, and generally oversee the supervision of pupils. Although there would not be any official holidays it was agreed there would be two weeks every year without lessons.

At mealtimes the five dormitories (or Houses) lined up on the parade ground in front of the assembly hall (or Great Hall). They then marched off in turn to the dining hall.

Meals were adequate and nourishing under the circumstances.
WINTER

A mural showing scenes and events during winter at the camp. Designed by A Evans and L Davies. Painted in oils by older boys in 1942.
Sketch explaining events shown opposite.
The school crest is a heraldic compilation from the insignia of Lewisham Council and London County Council. Above is the shield of the LCC.
SUMMER

Mural Showing scenes and events during summer at the camp.
Designed by A Evans and W Silcox. Painted in oils by older boys in 1942.
Sketch explaining events shown opposite. The school crest is a heraldic compilation from the insignia of Lewisham Council and London County Council. Above is the shield of the LCC.
Although there was some 'scrumping' and furtive visits to the baker’s shop in the village. The porridge on some mornings would be best eaten with a knife and fork, and pea soup was - unique and dried egg powder was served up in a hundred different ways. There was on most Sundays a piece of cake for tea.

The health of the 200 boys and staff was looked after by two nursing Sisters. They had a 'Sick Bay' with six beds and a daily clinic for minor problems. The village doctor was on call and the various 'spotty' problems and fevers were cured by a short stay in the Sick Bay. There were the occasional outbreaks of child diseases like Scarlet Fever and Measles. Until the outbreaks were over certain parts of the area were put into quarantine. The healthiest House, having the least illness, was Caernarvon - which was right next to the camp sewage disposal unit! Between them, the Sisters administered a system of medical discipline combined with loving kindness, that was ideal for the situation.

Lessons consisted of the following subjects - English language, English literature, Mathematics, including geometry and logarithms, History, Geography, Pitman's shorthand and Bookkeeping. Craftwork was also taught but a large part of this was boot repairing, a very useful occupation during clothes rationing. The most favourite lesson was Current Affairs when the latest situations on the various war fronts could be discussed. Usually ten minutes of the first morning lesson was devoted to religious subjects.

Apart from school lessons there were plenty of opportunities for many kinds of outings. One was picking whortleberries (bilberries) on Pitch Hill. The south side of the hill was covered with bushes and as many were eaten during the day as were taken back to the camp for the cooks to deal with. Another was picking foxgloves and packing them into hampers to be sent away for processing into digitalis, a heart stimulant. Also potato picking, cabbage planting and other similar activities for local landowners and farmers. One particularly hot day after cabbage planting the owner of a large estate let the boys have a swim in his outdoor pool. The absence of bathing trunks or towels made no difference to the chance of enjoying this pleasure.

During the summer there were plenty of sports activities to keep everyone occupied. Football, cricket, basketball, stoolball, athletics and generally messing about in the woods.

A field of allotments, allocated to the boys, stood by the side of Arundel House. All sorts of vegetables were grown as part of the 'Dig for Victory' campaign. The favourite being french radishes. Easily sown, quick to grow and easy to eat. The shovels and hoes hung on hooks underneath Arundel House, on windy nights the clanging together of metal parts echoed around the camp like peals of ghostly bells!

The daily routine was - Reveille at 7.30am, breakfast at 8.00,
assembly at 9.00, lessons from 9.30 until 12.00, then lunch, lessons from 1.00pm until 3.30. Evening meal at 5.00 and lights out at 9.00pm.

The winter saw clubs for chess, music, books, craftworks, etc. There was a cinema show once a week in the Great Hall. Will Hay and his cronies were a favourite, together with the Tarzan stories. Then there were the very popular camp concerts. Twice a month something was produced on stage. The anchor material for the shows was songs of the moment. 'The Last Time I Saw Paris', 'A Nightingale Sang In Berkeley Square' and so on. All the songs of the second world war, which as far as any did, corresponded to the 'Tipperaries' of the first world war. These were sung by a group of boys on stage with elementary dance-type movement - something visual to occupy the eyes while the ears listened. Then there were sketches, cross-talk and monologues, the usual concert party material. Fortunately Stanley Holloway's songs were available and one of these usually appeared. Several of these shows had themes. One was based on the sea and the navy and the songs were 'Anchors Aweigh' and 'The Fleets In Port Again'. One was based on Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs and was one of the best. The Walt Disney story was well known but a gentle satire of the camp was worked in. When Snow White was running the home for the dwarfs she organised them into the routine Saturday morning chores of the camp, the tidying of lockers, the shaking of blankets, the inspection of shoes and other domestic jobs. There was great attention to detail, the boy who played Dopey even wore a pair of roller skates so that he glided along as portrayed in the film.

At Christmas the school staff and camp put on a pantomine type show. Always a great success. Even the five male cooks joined in by forming a chorus line, and eyes widened at the sight of the female staff in red and green tights. Each boy had a programme, printed and duplicated with the available materials.

In the depth of winter with no outside activities possible, snow battles were arranged. Trenches dug, bastions built, piles of snowballs strategically placed. The two sides, North and South, gave battle in a storm of snowballs across the football field and from the tops of air raid shelters. In spite of Wellington boots full of snow and soaking wet woollen gloves it was found to be most exhilarating.

A weekend pursuit - indeed it consisted of a rush there and back - was a visit to the Regal Cinema at Cranleigh, two miles away. First, after finishing the midday meal, a sprint through the woods to get a seat before the film started. After the film another race to be back in time for roll-call before the evening meal. Regular roll-calls were part of a scheme to ensure no boys went missing.

Whenever possible lessons were taken in the open air. Nature Study
Breakfast in the dining hall. (Front to back - Dover (part), Caernarvon, Arundell.)
A woodwork class in the craft block.

A typical dormitory with metal double bunks and minimal lighting.
was an obvious choice. But chasing Meadow Brown butterflies was more exciting than identifying wild flowers. The shortage of books and paper meant that other teaching methods were used. For instance, during one open air English lesson boys were told to stand up, in turn, and speak for one minute on a given subject. One lad stood up and was given 'Windows'. He stood for 55 seconds with eyes closed and mouth open - 56 seconds - 57 seconds, and then blurted out 'Windows are an invention for looking through brick walls!'

Early in 1942 the Art master had the idea of painting murals on the blank chimney breasts at each end of the dining hall. Two talented boys were appointed to produce a design. Each was to be 54 inches square and to take the form of 15 diamond shapes. Each diamond to depict one of the camps activities. The centre diamond was a composite shield compiled from the Borough of Lewisham heraldry. One end depicted the happenings in summer the other the happenings in winter. The murals were painted in oils and kept a number of artistic boys busy for some months.

The violence of the war had it's varying effects on the school. There were three air raid shelters in the adjoining field, built with a concrete roof and half submerged into the ground. The original procedure was that at every air raid alert, whistles would blow and everybody lined up and were ushered into the shelters. This became disruptive as some alerts were very long and there was no sign of imminent danger. Later on, life went on normally, but warily, as enemy bombers droned overhead. While alerts were on there was always a teacher on 'fire watch' duty anxiously scanning the sky. The Battle of Britain provided plenty of excitement. Small groups of animated boys, in the middle of a field, gazing up at the dog fights in the sky, arguing between seeing a Spitfire or a Messerschmit. The teachers meanwhile furiously urging them to take cover from the spent cartridges and shrapnel.

One or two bombs landed on Ewhurst, jettisoned from escaping Dorniers. A small number of incendiary bombs were successfully extinguished, mainly by the prompt use of dustbin lids.

The sight that got the heart of every boy was the dreadful crimson glow in the sky when London was suffering the worst of the Blitz.

The long alerts called for special vigilance, some lasted for 12 hours. The set-out of the camp meant that the boys had to use a number of scattered buildings. In the evenings they went to their hobbies in various rooms. When they came back to their dormitories, they needed to use the washblocks and there was a great deal of going in and out. The buildings were completely 'blacked out' so that no chinks or shafts of light could betray the presence of the buildings to aircraft overhead. The black out was by shutters on the outside of the windows and covered lights of low wattage inside.
Later on black roller blinds were installed. Great care was needed in going in
and out and boys of this age are not especially careful.

During the period of the V1 'Flying Bombs' and the V2 Rockets in
1944 there were frequent visits to the air raid shelters because of the uncer-
tainty of where they would land. Some Flying Bombs did land in the village
and some damage was caused. To pass the time in the shelters a frequent
game was 'Buzz'. Boys took it in turns to speak consecutive numbers up from
One. Every time a number contained a seven or was divisible by seven,
instead of seven Buzz had to be said. A fun test of arithmetic and alertness.

The parents came to see the boys once a month, on the last Sunday.
Single decker London Transport buses arrived in convoy, sometimes as many
as ten or twelve of them. It was a testing time for these parents, particularly
when it was time for them to return to their unknown perils of the war. On
the whole the parents made light of the raids, which was natural in their
desire not to worry the boys but their powers of endurance were being severely
tested after spending many nights in the shelters.

**JUDGEMENT - The conclusions**

It has been calculated that 376,680 schoolchildren and teachers were
evacuated from London in the first week of September 1939. In the whole of
Britain perhaps one and a half million people were moved from an evacuation area
to a reception area. Many lives must have been saved. We must be thankful these
were evacuees and not refugees.

School teaching obviously suffered greatly during wartime and general
academic standards became much lower but the community spirit and resource-
fulness generated stood many in good stead during their future life.

One particular boy had his home completely destroyed and endured the
loss of a parent. After he left school he went to live in another area. He married,
had children and grandchildren but he says that there is still part of him that is
longing to 'go home'.

The camp is now a Field Centre run by Westminster City Council. The
huts of Canadian cedar still remain although the foundations have been renewed.

One of the young trees planted in 1940 was a weeping beech by the
entrance. Sixty years later it stands majestic and resplendent to greet visiting
groups to the camp.

When the war finished in 1945 the schools reopened in Brownhill Road
in their previous roles. Times and ideals change - now the site contains flats and
a petrol station.

'Operation Pied Piper' had never happened before and is never likely to
happen again, but it remains an integral and relevant part of British history.
# Teachers at Sayers Croft Camp 1940-1945

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<td>V. Williams</td>
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All teachers had a main subject but they had to give instruction in whatever the syllabus demanded. If they had no knowledge of the subject of the lesson it usually turned to "Current Affairs".

Abbreviations -

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Sketch of Camp 1940 - 1945