

Written by Jack Hawker

As a nine year old pupil at Bostall Lane (later Alexander Mcleod School) I left for evacuation a few days before WWII started, by train from Plumstead Station and then by Coach to Fowle Hall a Hamlet between Yalding and Paddock Wood.

The last off the Coach and allocated the worst billet, Flea and Bug ridden with a man and wife who later became residents in a Mental Institution.

I was not fed and once my paper carrier of rations ran out (Cornflakes, Biscuits and Corned Beef from what I remember) I was left to my own devices and lived on scrumpted apples, Tizer and Crisps from the local Pub for the next month before being rescued from the situation.

Our education continued in a Village School with locals in one half of the class and vaccies in the other. One day my Teacher walked past me as I sat at my desk and realised that the whole of the top of my head was moving. I was seriously lice infected.

From that period, the one positive event I remember and clear in my memory 70 years on, is of sitting in a large open top American car together with its Belgian Lady owner listening on the car Radio to Neville Chamberlain's announcement of the outbreak of war. From her clear Olive skin and thick dark hair she was probably Jewish and although in a flood of tears fortunate and grateful to get to England. How that lady got here, complete with very large car I never knew. She left within a few days, probably driven out by the less than friendly house livestock.

After the discovery of my moving scalp I was quickly moved to the home of a local Waggoner and his wife aptly named the Godley's. Mrs Godley took me into the Washhouse, stripped me, burnt my underclothes in the fire copper, doused me from head to foot in lamp oil and then bathed. After that I was allowed into the house and for the coming weeks and months through the severe 1940 Winter fed with superb food to return me to a respectable weight sufficient to cease to be called 'Tinribs'. Both the Godley's were good to me, I was allowed to help with the Horses (Prince Punch and Major) and travelled to market with them on many occasions.

By late spring of 1940 Mrs Godley had far too much of a commitment to working in the fields to continue the responsibility of me. I returned to London in time for the Air Raids with cramped nights in the Anderson or evenings stowed under the stairs while my Parents fed the local Aircraft Battery.

Dad was in a reserved occupation as an electrician in R.O.F Woolwich. As an Air Raid Warden he was probably on the receiving end of as much enemy action as the average squaddie although his weapons of defence consisted of nothing more than a Stirrup Pump, Incendiary Bomb scoop and a good straight left when a neighbour turned nasty after being reprovved for showing a light during an Air Raid.

I was evacuated twice more once with my Grandmother, Granddad, Aunts, my Sisters and Cousins, then on my own to work full time on a Farm as the Village School was crowded and had little to offer. I

returned home approaching fourteen years and in the August of 1944 started work as a messenger in R.O.F Woolwich Danger Buildings. In time for the V1 and V2 raids.

As my Dad was Shop Steward in the Electrical Shop I did not get my promised Electrical Apprenticeship. Dad left and went to Harwell Atomic Station, then under construction, I joined what was then Post Office Telephones and rose to the dizzy heights of Technical Officer. That was my war!

The wartime education system taught me nothing, my relatives were my educators but my time living in the countryside taught me the basic principles of Gaia and how to exist and provide for others from what was often freely available.

I have heard a good many differing arguments on the degree of fear among people in WWII. As Kids we knew little fear whether it was out collecting shrapnel before the all clear sounded or firing Catapults at the butterfly anti-personnel bombs in the Poplar trees on what is now part of Thamesmead.

The average Adult was wary rather than scared, the one exception was an Aunt who spent some time in Chislehurst Caves. Where there was a permanent smell of Latrines and the 'Night Soil' men stretched the contents close to where people were sleeping.

The caves probably sheltered hundreds, maybe more. I spent one night there in a huge vaulted cavern with candle niches in the walls covered in ancient and ominous looking stains.