

## **Letter written by John Plummer**

### Reminiscences of a London Evacuee during World War Two

From this very house in Roseveare Road, Grove Park, South East London at the outbreak of the Second World War, 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1939, I was evacuated together with three sisters and a brother to Folkestone, Kent.

We were separated on arrival having assembled at Marvels Lane Primary School in the morning when we were sent by steam train to this vulnerable seaside resort. My early experience of a foster-parent was very unpleasant; she being both harsh and unkind. The Major's wife denied food for any alleged slightly misconduct. A strict disciplinarian no less. We stayed in Folkestone, about six months when the 'Big Berthas' from Calais opened up and shelled Dover and Folkestone. I can still recall dead German seamen being washed up on the beach wearing navy blue jumpers and hexagonal naval headdress.

My brother and I played around live mines and jumped off fishing smacks' ramps. Great fun but highly dangerous. Schooling was intermittent, haphazard. In fact, I don't remember any lessons given in Folkestone.

Miss Judd, later honoured, was in overall charge of the evacuees and decided billeting arrangements. But mother paid us a welcome visit disputing, with the foster parent whether we had had 'proper' food at mealtimes.

Before Dunkirk (I think early March) myself, sisters and brother were hurriedly sent by steam train to Tredegar, Monmouthshire, South Wales (now Gwent) which was a coal mining town near Ebbw Vale. Again, all family members were separated. Miss Judd continued in charge and drew some criticism for selecting unsuitable billets.

My first foster parent in South Wales, a Mrs Savage, died within a month of my stay. I remember there were four rows of houses and chickens roaming free on a shale slope. Mrs Savage had an accumulator wireless and a very large family Bible placed on the centre of a lightly polished table.

The second foster parent residing in Brynmawr Street – a Mrs Reid – was mercenary strict and uncaring. Her interest was the receipt of the Billeting Allowance, seven shillings and sixpence, and her daughter in the WAAF. When the daughter's boyfriend was due to arrive, a Corporal in the RAF, I was sent out the house in torrential rain to play along the banks of the River Howy. As a result of this experience I contracted double pneumonia and was at 'deaths door'. However, Father Davies of the Hostel of the Good Shepherd off Iron Street tended and prayed for me and I survived the crisis period. This occurred before the use of antibiotics. You either recovered or succumbed to this severe illness.

My third and final foster parent was the best of all. I remained with 'Nan' Lewis, 1 Temple Street, for the rest of the duration of the war. She treated me like her own children, no better no worse, and selected me from a line of children drawn up, as it were, in the hostel. 'I'll have that one; he needs

fattening' she said (I was thin and slight). The memory of that selection remains vividly with me to this day.

Herb Lewis worked above ground feeding furnaces for Old Ty Trist Colliery. He took me down the mine one Saturday morning and conditions underground were primitive. Miners at the coal face hewed coal with picks and shovels at a seam not above three feet in height, water swilling at your feet at ground level. There as an endless conveyor belt receiving the best Welsh coal, and pit ponies dragged drums of coal to the bottom of the shaft. I seemed to recollect a canary to ascertain the possibility of the presence of methane gas. The miners worked three different shifts and came home begrimed with coal dust but by 1945 pit head baths were installed.

Mr Lewis took his bath in a sawn-in-half large coppers wooden barrel. We were all bathed in this barrel – grandchildren of Mrs Lewis and myself; hot water came from the blackened cast iron cauldron simmering on a coal fire in the wash house. The fire was never out, summer or winter and the wash house was lit by a as mantle. On the distempered wall crickets occasionally appeared.

The hob and oven were blackened and the steel fender brass cleaned; also a bath brick was used to smarten up the step outside the house, and the walls were extensively whitewashed. The toilet was outside in the yard and human waste had to be periodically collected. There was a pigeon loft next door and no recognizable garden – just a yard. It was so cold in winter (1940s) that cats froze on the wall, unwanted dogs were thrown in sacks in mountain ponds. Our football pitch was a levelled up tip from disused No. 9 pit, no grass just hardened shale.

From the outset, the evacuees in Tredegar were taught in Ebenezer Chapel and our playground was the burial ground surrounding the chapel. I used to leap frog the Gothic-shaped headstones recording the victims of cholera and typhoid. This bizarre playground was not fearful to me! Sweets, bananas and oranges were scarce but I never recall being denied adequate food. In late July/August we gathered whinberries (whortleberries in England). Whinberry pie is the finest fruit pie I have ever eaten. Whinberries flourished on low-lying bushes on the mountain tops skirting the Brecon Beacons.

An incident occurred which my brother failed to remember even though he made a pencil drawing of the crash scene. A German Heinkel flew over the mountain top rapidly descending. The pilot in his cockpit was clearly visible and I waved to the aircraft with no sense it was an enemy aeroplane. Such innocence of a schoolchild of 9! It was believed the fighter-bomber was intending a raid on Swansea. The location was Trefin en route to Dowlais.

Christmas was unusual in that I had to go to Red Lion Square, off Commercial Street to receive a large rectangular Christmas fruitcake from a communal oven baked there. (This practice is recorded in 'A Christmas Carol') The food I ate in South Wales differed from typical London fare. In Wales, we had Welsh rarebit cooked before an open fire, sheep's head, sheep's tongue and salt-fish splayed out and baked. Potch (swede and potatoes) for Sunday main meal and lastly 'piecluts'.

As a lad in Tredegar I used to trundle a steel hoop along thoroughfares of the town. It made a clattering sound but it could be controlled by a bucket-handle hook.

Tredegar has changed; no LMS locomotives, no coal mine, no pit heaps, fewer whinberries. More new houses, no gas lamps, no communal kitchens or bakers but the Welsh people endure and their Eisteddfod. These are some of my recollections as I approach 79.