

Written by Joyce Russell

It was the third of September, 1939. I was looking forward to my seventh birthday in October. My sisters Florence who was fourteen and Chrissie who was nearly five took our usual walk to the local cemetery to put flowers on our grandparent's grave. After performing this deed we called into the sweet shop next door to the cemetery owned by Mrs Lindsey in Upminster Road, Rainham. As we were buying our sweets there was a terrible wailing noise very frightening for three young girls. We looked at Mrs Lindsey for an explanation, she told us to hurry home as quickly as possible. We hurried along only to be met by our Uncle Reg who had come to look for us on his bicycle our parents explained that we were at war with Germany. What's war we asked not realising the significance of it all. It probably would not last long we were told, that day nothing of particular interest happened, soon the all clear sounded, a different sound to the first.

Later the bombing really began in earnest, night after night the siren would wail, as we lived quite close to Hornchurch Airdrome a lot of the bombs were destined for this area. It wasn't long before we saw a lorry delivering straight and curved galvanised metal panels to each house, this was to be our air raid shelter built underground to protect us from the raids. We children used them as a slide until Dad and Uncle Reg were digging a large hole and soon had the panels bolted together and had our shelter made, this was then covered in earth. It was a strenuous task and I don't know how the older folk would have put these panels together and dig a large hole without any mechanical aids, so this was our underground home there was a small opening at the front in which you got through to step onto a stool or such like. The floor was wooden and raised about six inches from the earth to prevent it being water logged in the winter. Wooden bunks were at each side and the end for us to sleep on as we were used to sleeping on a nice feather bed.

Sadly the bombing did get worse especially on the dark winter nights as the enemy could hide behind the dark clouds on a moonless night. All windows had to be blacked out so before we could put on the lights we had to pull down the blinds everywhere was complete darkness outside very eerie. Most nights we would go to bed only to be wakened by the siren and would have to get dressed quickly to go downstairs. The men in the avenue had to take it in turns to do fire watching duty. Mr Bulbeck who lived at the end of the road was in charge of the fire watches. He would call with his book for Dad and Uncle to sign each time they were on duty, one night a raid was already on when he called, it was reasonably quiet so we were still indoors but all of a sudden there was a loud explosion and Mr Bulbeck dived under our large family table much to the astonishment of our family. He eventually crawled out and was most apologetic.

The winter was quite severe cold frost and snow so as my mother had chest problems she couldn't sleep down the air raid shelter. With all the condensation dripping on our heads it was out of the question so we had a mattress on the floor under the table. I think the idea came after Mr Bulbeck's escapade. Mum, Chrissy and I slept there most nights. Florence wouldn't leave her bed and stayed upstairs with the notion that what will be will be! The two boys Alfred and John were mostly outside with Dad and Uncle watching and listening. My eldest sister Ada was married and lived a few turnings

away so after every air raid Uncle would go down to her home to make sure all was well as her husband Bill was in the army. During this time we still had to go to school we walked to the end of the road and, as soon as the siren sounded we were marched to the shelter. I always liked to sit by the door as I liked to listen but the teacher always told us to sing. Every Monday morning we had to take in a container with snacks such as crisps, biscuits etc. just in case we were in the shelter for a long time. It was taken home to replenish the next week we loved Fridays knowing we would have our snacks to eat.

Our school was bombed and classrooms lost but fortunately it was at night so no children were hurt although some children from our school were killed at home. The school was closed for a while but we went to peoples houses a few afternoons each week until the school reopened. Our next experience of the war was when we were issued with a strange contraption called a gas mask. We had to try them on for size and we looked like someone out of space. We had to carry them to school every day in a cardboard box which we had covers made to protect them from rain luckily we didn't have to use them.

The Americans were very kind to send us some chocolate powder. We took containers to school and it was served out to us, it was delicious and we were very grateful as during the war sweets were on ration we had 3/4lb. sweets to last a month. We had no ice cream at all and oranges and bananas were very scarce and when they were in the shops there was always a big queue many times I got to the counter only to be told Sold out!

We heard that a plane had been shot down round the corner from us so we set off to see the German plane as we thought but when we got to it we realized it was one of ours it appears that it was shot at while bombing over Germany. The plane was damaged so not knowing if he would safely make it back to England he told his crew to bail out, he realized too late that when he returned to England he didn't know the flare colour for that night and he was mistaken for the enemy. I learned all this years later the pilot was traced and interviewed about his escapades it appears he also bailed out when he was shot down in Romford in Essex but the plane came on a few miles and crashed near us, near a wooded area so no one was hurt.

The strain was beginning to tell on my Mother she would faint every time the guns at White Post corner opened fire as they were quite close to us and were very loud. My Aunty asked if we would like to go to Devon with her and my two cousins Jean and Wilf. We could stay with relatives of Aunties son in law at least we could have a break and some good nights sleep as some places including where we were going didn't know there was a war on. We packed our cases and set off for Waterloo Station, Mum, Johnny, Chrissy and I. That in itself was an eye opener for us as although we lived just twenty miles from London we had never been there. My sister Ada moved into our house to look after Dad, Florence, Alfie and Uncle Reg as Ada s husband Bill was in the army abroad.

We really enjoyed the journey to Devon as we hadn't travelled much by train mostly we went out in our pony and trap or on the bus to school. We arrived at South Molton Road Station full of

anticipation. We didn't know what to expect we were met at the station by a lady called Mrs Gillard who ran a private hire service. I was fascinated by her driving as there wasn't many lady drivers around at the time so as a seven year old I vowed I would learn to drive like Mrs Gillard when I was old enough. We drove through narrow country lanes, room for only one car so if we met anyone we had to go back to a passing space. We passed the fields where we saw the cows and sheep grazing. We hadn't seen many animals. In Rainham our farms are mostly arable with lots of vegetables where pea picking is a common sight in June also we were surprised at the animals being driven along the road another thing you never saw at home. My Father and brothers worked on the farms in Rainham driving horses with a plough or driving a tractor.

We arrived at Coombe Cottages it was certainly out in the wilds so to speak one neighbour next door and a farm on the hill at the front of the house a couple more farms up the lane. Mr and Mrs Elliott were an elderly couple, Mr Elliott was a tall slim man Mrs Elliott was quite pale faced with a full Mumsy figure. We had a job to understand them at first as they had a strong Devon dialect. Their family of all girls had grown up and left home some were in the Land Army. It must have been like an invasion to their house to have two adults and four children to move in with them

At nightfall Tilly lamps were lit and when it was bed time we were given candles to see our way up stairs to bed. It was a new experience for us I remember we were used to flicking a switch for electric light to come on Jean and I slept on a mattress on the floor while Mum and Aunt Jessie slept in a double bed with Chrissy and Johnny and Wilf also slept on a mattress on the floor all in the same room. At least we were able to get a good nights sleep no bombs or guns to wake us up and we were grateful for that although I was a bit worried at first not to see an air raid shelter in the garden .

We soon settled down to the country rustic style of life by going outside in the morning to draw water from the huge tank to use to wash ourselves I can't remember how we had a bath probably didn't have one. I do remember that the toilet was also outside, back in Rainham we had had our house built just five years before the war, so we had inside bathroom with hot water and electric but for all that we enjoyed our stay at Coombe Cottage and it was much appreciated and we thought it was quite a novelty for us .We realized how primitive other people lived and it made us appreciate our mod cons at home.

The neighbours next door to the Elliots were called Loosemore. There was the grandfather who drove a pony and trap, the boys were Percy, Jack, Ronnie and Arthur. They had a rustic shed in the garden where they hung the rabbits they caught. We went out with them sometimes they took a dog, ferret and a trap. We thought it was cruel but I guess that was part of their income to live on as the rabbits were sent to the London markets. I don't think my mother knew we witnessed the rabbits being killed as we were allowed to play outside as it was safe to do so in those days.

So to the school which was 1 to 1 ½ miles away we called for the children from Spittle Farm, Margaret Muriel and George Down. We had to walk through unmade lane until we got to the road which was all uphill till we reached the school, quite a trek for seven and eight years old no penny bus rides here!

Crissy was nearly five so she didn't go to the school from Coombe Cottage. Mum thought it was too far for a five year old to walk.

The school at Kingsnympton was quite small in comparison to Rainham it only had two classrooms. We had to share these with the local children and several evacuees of different ages from Erith in Kent. It was at this school that I learned to knit it was with yarn on wooden needles and I made a dish cloth also my only school photo was at this school with the whole group of all the classes. My teacher was Miss Snow who later married but sadly died in childbirth.

My best friend at school was a little girl from Kent called Beryl Lockyer who was nine years old. I can't remember who she was living with but she was visited by her Father, never a mother so I don't know the reason for this, but she got ill and died of pneumonia. I was very upset to have lost such a close friend and classmate. Beryl was buried in the church yard in Kingsnympton and I have visited her grave in later years.

Every night on the way home from school the Down children would collect their cows from the field as we passed and drove them back to the farm to be milked. I was scared of them and used to get behind the gate.

Aunt Jessie Jean and Wilf returned to Rainham after a few weeks as Wilf was homesick and missed his friends, he threatened to run away if he couldn't go home, so home they went and didn't come back again.

Winter arrived and the lane got very muddy, our town shoes were not much use in this kind of weather, so while Uncle was down to see us he walked to South Molton to get Johnny and I a pair of Wellington boots. He couldn't get my size so he brought me a pair of old fashioned lace up boots like my grandmother used to wear, but at a young age I wasn't going to wear them and I was most upset. It was then decided that we would go home or try to move nearer to the school in Kingsnympton.

Mum was asking around and was told to try at Villa Cottage next door to the Methodist Chapel where Mr and Mrs Hopper lived they already had two evacuees Sheila and Denise from Kent staying with them. Mr Mrs Hopper agreed to let us have two rooms a living room and a bedroom Mum would do all our own cooking and washing etc. We left Coombe Cottage and the Elliotts were very understanding why we were moving to the village because of the long walk to school.

Mr Hopper was a short tubby man with a ruddy complexion always smiling. He wore a trilby hat and smoked Players cigarettes. He was a carpenter and wheelright by trade his workshop was knee deep in saw dust and wood shavings. One day while Johnny and I were collecting the eggs we were told to look in the workshop as the hens sometimes laid eggs in there, imagine our surprise to see a coffin. It scared us so much we didn't hang, around to pick up the eggs we made a hasty retreat we didn't realize he was also the local coffin maker.

On the smallholding there was a couple of cows who supplied us with fresh milk every day also Mrs Hopper made clotted cream. There were a few pigs hence sides of bacon hanging in the dairy which was a room without windows just a wire mesh vent it might have been wartime rationing but we were supplied with plenty of bacon eggs and cream.

Mrs Hopper was a tall thin lady with dark hair which was put into dinky curlers every night and she always wore a starched pinafore. She was a very busy lady, she didn't stop to walk anywhere she was always trotting and dashing about. I guess that's why she was so slim she led a busy life. Mrs Hopper was involved with the Methodist Chapel. Mr Hopper would go to evening service but he used to nod off to sleep as I've seen Mrs Hopper give him a nudge during the service. We children went to Sunday school afternoons then the evening service. It was my first experience of chapel as we hadn't been to chapel in Rainham. At the anniversary I had to say a poem and it went like this:

How much I love you Mother dear a little girlie said
I love you in the morning and when I go to bed
I love you when I'm near you and when I'm far away
I love you when I'm at my work and when I'm at my play

All the years hence and I can still remember it. The thing that struck us most of all about the Devonshire people was the dialect some people were very hard to understand. Also they called potatoes teddies and if was raining they would say it is dropping but we soon learnt what they were talking about.

One Sunday Sheila and Denise said they would like to walk to Chulmleigh I told them it was a long way to walk and we would be to late back to go to Sunday school but they insisted that we went. After walking quite a few miles we realised it was almost dinner time, we turned back not quite making it to Chulmleigh after all I did tell them!!!

On the way back we came face to face with Mrs Hopper and Mother who had come looking for us, they were really worried one could tell by their faces. I never did find out how they knew we were on that road but Mrs Hopper was very cross with Sheila and Denise. My dear Mum just looked relieved she had found us. Sheila and Denise were scolded and sent of ahead of us with the threat of being sent to bed without any dinner but as they arrived home Mr Hopper gave them their dinner and then they were sent to the bedroom. They never asked me to take them to Chulmleigh again we had all learnt our lesson.

Haymaking time was a very busy time in the countryside, farmers would help each other to "make hay" and when all were finished they would sit round a huge farmhouse table and have supper of cured ham, cheese, scones, pastries etc.! With a drink of ale and a good old natter. As there wasn't a baker in Kingsnympton most cakes and pastries were homemade but a baker did come about twice a week from South Molton. Everyone in Devon are so friendly they always speak even if they don't know you, one day my mother went for a walk up the lane from Villa Cottage and met a lady doing likewise in the opposite direction as soon as they passed the time of day they knew that they had

come from more or less the same area. Mrs Shine was a Jewish lady and came from Stepney Green in London. When Mum told her she had come from Rainham Mrs Shine knew it straight away as the Jewish Cemetery is at the bottom of our road. They became friends and visited each other back in our home towns when the war was over. In fact I'm still in touch with her daughter Michelle now.

Just along the road from Villa Cottage was the local blacksmith we would often stop and watch him shoeing the horses on the way to school as we had a pony of our own at Rainham called Molly. Behind the blacksmith shop was a little cottage where Sally Lowe lived with her elderly mother. Sally was a sweet docile unmarried lady very quietly spoken and of gentle nature she sold sweets and cigarettes and a few other commodities from her hallway. As you walked to the shop doorway you passed the raised garden which was covered with roses the sweetest smell of the flowers I've ever experienced I can almost smell that perfume as I write about it. Sally's mother was bedridden, she lay in the room off the hallway and one could see her as you were being served if she had reason to call Sally she would always answer just coming my bird. Why bird and not Mother I know not why!!!

Just passed Sally's was the New Inn Pub run by Mr and Mrs Wonnacott. My Mother would take us up to the pub but we always went into Mrs Wonnacott's front room. Mum would have half pint of Stout and us children would have lemonade Mrs Wonnacott spoke very quickly with a strong Devon accent she always called my mother "Mrs somebody" yet she knew our surname was Gregory. She often admired my mother's hats and I know my mother often gave her a hat. I don't know why as the poor lady didn't get out much she was always too busy running the pub.

Mr and Mrs Bergman owned another shop in the village they sold just about everything groceries drapery and newsagents etc. If you wanted to see a doctor you also went to Mr Bergman's shop the surgery was held in the front room twice a week, I had to go and see the doctor as I needed to have my tonsils out which was done at South Molton Hospital at the age of nine. Mr and Mrs Francis ran the Post Office in Kingsnympton the postman delivered the mail to the outlying farms on horseback nothing like that happened in Rainham. My sister Ada wrote to say she was sending us a parcel for Christmas on the day we were expecting it to arrive there was deep snow. As there was only one post delivered each day one could go to the post office and collect any post later in the day so I trudged through the snow to the post office. It was crowded with evacuees all waiting for news or parcels from home I was pleased when Mrs Francis called my name and handed over the large parcel I couldn't wait to get home to see what goodies there were. I remember there were sweets and biscuits also a blue dress for me and a pink one for Chrissy. Girls didn't wear trousers like they do now. It was certainly worth walking through the snow for.

I think that sums up the village except to say I don't know much about the butchers shop as I never went there.

Most of the village people had evacuees but I hope they were all as happy as we were but then we had our Mother with us as. Mum was very possessive she wouldn't allow us to go away from her. Also

we had our lovely elder sister Ada to look after the rest of the family back home so we were very lucky in that respect. Florence came down to Devon for a week's holiday but at the end of the week she liked it so much she stayed on but she didn't go to school as she was fourteen. It was August when I went into hospital to have my tonsils out at South Molton. Mum was too upset to take me in so Mrs Shine took me in while Mum, so I was told, sat in the car crying. My Father came down at the weekend and I came out of hospital on the Tuesday at that time my Mother was offered a house to rent for three shillings a week (Fifteen pence) but Dad said as the bombing had more or less stopped we should go home to see our relations and friends again and get back to our school but we were still sad to leave our friends in Devon.

My sister moved back to her own house with her boys, so I used to sleep at her house to keep her company and help with the boys as her husband Bill was still abroad. There wasn't many bombs but a new thing called a doodle bug, it was like a plane without a pilot at night one could see the flames shooting out of the rear and when the flames went out you knew it was coming down to explode. When we saw one at night we would wish it to keep going, but knowing some poor soul would be killed. One such night when Ada was watching at the door she called to me to duck she had seen the flames go out and knew it was near I grabbed the baby and pushed him under the bed and just managed to get my head under too, when it was safe I had to pull him from under the bed. Ada wondered where her baby was when she looked in the cot.

After a while the doodle bugs stopped and in their place was a rocket from these there was one loud bang followed by another one couldn't hear these coming like the doodle bugs so there was no warning by this time I didn't need to sleep at my sisters so I was back home again.

One Saturday night I decided to put more coloured pieces into my Kaleidoscope when I went to bed I put in on the dressing table at six fifteen am, there was a terrific bang and all the windows blew in, the dressing table was across our bed and the bed was covered in glass a rocket had dropped just down the road to us. My brother was cut and had to get bandaged up, every window in the house was blown out with the blast. Our ration books which were on the window sill were blown across the garden. Miraculously no one was killed. Had it been a weekday it would have been a different story. Our house alone would have had the older ones getting ready for work at that time of day and the blast alone would have injured or killed them. My Kaleidoscope was smashed to pieces on the floor.

Uncle boarded up the windows. Mum and Chrissy went to stay with my sister. I went to stay at my aunty's house for three weeks until the house was repaired. I was quite happy there with my cousin Sylvia who was the same age as me. Gradually things got quieter not so many rockets, so Ada decided to have a holiday at my cousins in Southend and I went along with her. During the holiday war was declared over on the sixth of June so we didn't finish our holiday instead we came home. When I came home from Devon I was asked to collect for a peace party so every Saturday I collected sixpence from most houses in Lake Avenue. I took it to Maggie Livermore who was the treasurer and soon after the war was over Maggie organised a lovely party for the children with most adults joining

in. The only person not able to join in was myself. I had cut my foot open on a bottle a few days before I couldn't walk so was confined to a chair what luck!!!! after collecting all that time.

So the war was over and we started to visit Mrs Hopper for our holidays. When we reached our teens my cousin Jean and I went to Kingsnympton on a chapel outing to Minehead and met up again with George Down who I used to walk to school with ten years previous he was with his cousin Gerald. We made up a foursome and became boy and girlfriends for a year being young and living two hundred miles apart we all met and married others partner.

After Mr Hopper died Mrs Hopper moved into her cousins house in the village and Villa Cottage was sold. I took my family to Devon every year staying mostly at the seaside with our caravan but I always called at Kingsnympton to see Mrs Hopper. My two daughters Denise and Julie were shown where I went to school during the war also the muddy lane we walked from Coombe Cottage. Now two of my grandchildren have visited the village. Mrs Hopper died in March 1996 but I still visit her grave every year and attend the chapel when possible. Many others have passed on over the years including Mr Mrs Francis from the Post Office but I'm still in touch with Judith their daughter who married Gerald but who also sadly died. Mr Bergman who owned the shop lived to be one hundred. I guess I must be the only evacuee who has visited my "second" home every year since I first arrived at the age of seven and I'm now seventy three. I would like to think of it as a record.