

Written by Muriel Tytheridge

Memories of an Evacuee

I was ten years old when World War Two was declared in September 1939. I lived with my mother and father, two brothers and two sisters in Woolwich, South East London. We were told in the news on the radio that all children of school age must be evacuated to safety. My eldest brother joined the Royal Navy and my youngest sister was not at school yet, so it was just my older sister, who was thirteen, and my younger brother who was eight and a half, and myself, who would have to be evacuated. My parents were very sad but knew it was for our own good. Woolwich, where we lived was on the edge of the River Thames where all the docks were near the Royal Arsenal, which was a big factory that made ammunitions, guns etc, for use in the War.

Within a short time we assembled at school ready to go on coaches to the country. We were allowed to take only a change of clothes, our gas masks and one toy. As we had never been on holiday it was like an exciting adventure to us. We thought we would only be gone for a short time and at our age we had no idea how serious the situation was.

We arrived in Wrotham village and thought we were miles from home. We were, in fact, only about forty miles away. We stood in the village hall and had to stand together if we had a brother or sister. The three of us stood closely together. People in the village had been asked if they would kindly take an evacuee into their own home. Soon the ones who were standing on their own were placed with a new family and then, where there were two together, they were eventually chosen, as they tried hard not to separate brothers and sisters. When most of the children had gone off with their new families, the ones that were left were put into a circle with a teacher in charge – my sister, my brother and three others plus myself. A very kind Lord and Lady Stotford who had a big house on the edge of the village had agreed to take six plus a teacher. We were shown to our rooms, which were servant's quarters, but the servants had been called up to serve in the War. The two boys had a room of their own and us four girls had to share a room that only had two single beds so we had to sleep head to toe! We thought it was great fun. The teacher had a room to herself.

Every evening we were allowed into the drawing room and had to sit on the floor and hear the news. The grounds of the house were wonderful with beautiful weeping willow trees that you could walk right into and it was like going into a tent. It was like living a park to us who didn't have much of a garden back home. They were very kind to us but unfortunately Lord Stotford was taken ill and had to go into hospital and after six months we had to leave. My younger brother was so unhappy and homesick that my parents had to come and take him home. This meant a new home for my elder sister and I.

We were re-homed with two very nice sisters who lived together. About this time the war had really begun and lots of bombers were flying over Kent to get to London to drop their bombs. We saw lots of German

planes being shot down. After a while we had to have a mattress on the floor of the cupboard under the stairs and my sister and I slept in there to be safe. The headmaster of the local school agreed that evacuees should share the village hall with the local children for lessons. In the mornings we had the school and in the afternoon we had lessons in the local recreation field, or went on walks studying nature through the country lanes. The following week we changed our routine with the local children. After a while the authorities found a building we could use permanently.

Our parents were allowed to visit every three months – a Sunday trip that took ages to get to us by coach and then the return journey home. We usually only had an hour or two together.

The village was very nice and while we were staying with the two sisters, we went to church twice on a Sunday – with them to morning service and in the afternoon to Sunday school.

In those days the law was that you left school at fourteen and started work, so my sister became fourteen in the November and had to return to Woolwich to start work. There was no further education and our own school had been bombed. The two sisters thought I would be too lonely on my own in their home, so asked for me to be re-homed.

Two miles out of the village was Yaldham Manor, who had taken on sixteen children to stay. One, like my sister, had returned home at fourteen. They had a vacancy for me. It was a wonderful place to live. Again they had big grounds like a park and we slept in the Great Hall – eight camp beds down each side. Mr and Mrs Cory, who owned the Manor, had four sons who were all away fighting in the War.

Yaldham Manor had quite a history. At one time Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn had passed through and stayed at the Manor on their way to Dover and Anne had scratched her name on one of the diamond shaped window panes with her diamond ring and it is still there today.

The young servants had been called up into one of the forces but there were still many servants living at the Manor. There was a cook, butler upstairs maid, downstairs maid, kitchen staff and many gardeners. Mr and Mrs Cory gave us all 6p a week which we received every Friday and 3p was taken back in savings in case we needed to buy a birthday present or buy a stamp to send a letter home to our parents. As we were two miles from the village we were nowhere near any shops to spend any money so we saved most of it.

Our parents would send us their 'sweet' ration and we would make it last a long time! We were allocated a different job each week, which we did after school and at weekends. Maybe help cook in the kitchen, or butler in his pantry (where he let us make butter balls and shapes with the wooden boards), or the gardener, or the upstairs maid where we would fold the beds back and dust around, and sometimes help lay out the evening dress to be worn that evening. To lay the table took ages, as there were so many knives and forks and lots of different glasses to out on the table. It was like a different world to us but we

loved every minute of the variety. We had to walk two miles to school and another two miles home again – in all weathers! Not much traffic in those days and nobody had a car so we were used to walking.

I remember, after several bouts of tonsillitis, being told that I would have to go into hospital to have them removed. I was taken to Sevenoaks Hospital and I can still remember how lonely I felt when other children had visitors and I did not. My parents could not travel such a distance other parents and children were very kind to me and the nurses made an extra fuss of me. I soon recovered and after a week I was back at Yaldham Manor and was well looked after. Mr and Mrs Cory very kindly paid for all the children living at the Manor to be dressed the same. The girls had two dresses and boys had shirts the same. At Christmas we were all given a dressing gown and a pair of slippers.

As soon as I became fourteen I had to return back to Woolwich as my sister had done a few years earlier. All the schools in the area had either been bombed or were closed because everyone had been evacuated. My father wanted me to train to be a shorthand typist so had to pay for me to attend Pittman's College in Lewisham. The War was still on at this time. We got hardly any sleep as the siren used to sound and off we had to go into the air raid shelter – Mum, Dad sister, brother and myself. It was always cold and damp down there but we were lucky that we stayed safe as at that time the German planes were dropping the Doodlebugs. These were dreadful bombs where the engine cut out and you just had to wait and listen to the explosion when it landed and hope that nobody had been killed. They were, of course, trying to bomb the docks and the Woolwich Arsenal and did a terrible lot of damage.

I look back on my time as an evacuee with fond memories and think of all the kind people who allowed us children to be part of their lives.