

Written by Olive Obbard

It was Friday 1st September 1939.

Unlike today we had no T.V. News was not freely available and we had only one daily news programme on the radio and that was at 9 p.m. Of course there were newspapers and since the Munich agreement, which had been signed by Mr. Chamberlain the year before, the newspapers continued to speak of war as inevitable.

I can still recall the newsreels in the cinema showing Mr. Chamberlain holding up a piece of paper and declaring 'Peace in our time' that sadly was not to be.

By the summer of 1939, to all but pacifists, war was quite clearly on the cards and preparations were being made to evacuate all the children from the big cities.

I had started my secondary education in September of 1938. Schools were at that time graded by entrance examination, Grammar, Central, Elementary and Voluntary aided this last group were the same as grammar schools but funded by the City Guilds. A few free places were awarded to the 'brighter girls' but most were fee paying.

I had been awarded one of these places but like many working class families money was very short and my parents decided I would be happier at a Central school where the obvious difference in available money would not be so noticeable. Central Schools did reach a very high academic standard so I would not be too disadvantaged.

So I started at Forest Hill central School in 1928, our school was in the process of being rebuilt so we were temporarily housed in a large old school at Catford.

My parents, like all with young children, had to decide whether to agree to evacuation or to keep me at home. We had no idea what a 'modern' war was going to be like, everybody had been issued with a gas mask so the threat of gas attacks was already in our mind.

Bombing was an anticipated fear particularly as we were well aware of the death and destruction inflicted by the German air force during the Spanish Civil War.

My parents decided that it would be in my best interest to be evacuated so on the 1st September 1939 I left home with my clothes in a kit bag and a packed lunch. I think that as far as I was concerned the whole thing was just rehearsal for war had not been declared and continued peace was still a possibility.

We assembled at school before marching in pairs to Catford Bridge Station. I think there were people watching us but that is all a bit hazy.

Eventually our train arrived and off we went. At this point we had no idea where we were bound, it could have been Scotland for all we knew.

We did in fact end up at Ashford in Kent and after collecting an issue of rations (1 tin corned beef and 1 tin condensed milk) we were loaded onto buses and driven away. Our school was distributed between four villages and I went to Aldington.

The village was quite small and the host families just came to the village hall and chose the children they would they would be having to live with them. It seems a dreadful way to go about things but I suppose everyone was doing their best in the circumstances.

This episode was perhaps one of the most important in my life, for it took me from a very respectable working class home, where every penny counted, into a comfortable middle class society and a totally different world. This has influenced my attitude and thinking for the rest of my life.