

"RECOLLECTIONS OF AN EVACUEE"

By Margery Lucas.

At the start of the war I was almost eight years old and at that age it didn't mean very much to me. There were air raid warnings and such things and I do remember people talking about Hitler.

When the Battle of Britain was raging my young brother, Godfrey, and I went to stay with our Granny and Grandad Lucas in Danehill. I always loved being there amongst the countryside which was so different from the hustle and bustle of London.

The first time we stayed at Danehill was at the time of the Dunkirk crisis and I vaguely remember how relieved everybody was when my dad was reported safe from that encounter.

Godfrey and I stayed in Danehill until well after the Battle of Britain but I always remember watching the dog fights overhead. Godfrey used to sleep under the stairs with Granny and I slept under the big table as a precaution.

When things quietened down somewhat Godfrey and I were allowed to go back to London. By this time there was another member of the family - another brother, Bill.

Dad was away at the war and Mum and I together with Godfrey and Bill remained in London until that terrible weekend when Hitler sent over the first of his "doodle-bugs". Only half a mile away from us that Sunday morning the Guard's Chapel was hit with the loss of many lives.

Mum realised that we had to get out of London and so, once again, we came down to Danehill to stay with Granny and Grandad Lucas.

We went to the village school, where dear Mr. Bird was headmaster. Whenever I could I asked to stay to lunch because I loved, and still do, mince and potatoes, that was the staple diet. From Mr. Bird I learned a lot about nature and God's gifts all around us, together with country dancing in the school playground. So many things come to mind when one sits back and thinks. Going on nature walks, finding a rare orchid, picking wild strawberries and using the wood opposite as a mock battle ground. Our imagination was endless. We girls had to be the Red Cross nurses. Whenever I hear the song "There'll always be an England" I immediately think of us having to sit under our desks and sing this if there was a raid or any other trouble.

I remember Mrs. Harris's son getting married and how soon after that he was killed.

(Hugh Blackall see page 29)

When Hitler stepped up his rocket onslaught it was decided to evacuate the children to a safer place and Wales was the destination. Godfrey and I were in the group which went from the Danehill area and I think we got on the train at Haywards Heath. I know it was a very long journey because the train was shunted from place to place to avoid troubled areas.

I remember going through the Severn Tunnel and we were eventually off loaded in South Wales. Our journey ended in a school hall in Cwmavon which is not far from Port Talbot. Village people came and chose which children they wanted. Godfrey and I appeared to be a bit of a problem because we had to stay together. However, we eventually went to stay with a man and his wife on the outskirts of the village, but we were not there very long as the lady was probably not able to cope with two children.

So we were re-located with another older couple, a Mr. and Mrs. Isaiah, we were very happy there. He was an elder of the local chapel and also worked at the Port Talbot steel works. Godfrey and I went to chapel every Sunday and to Sunday School. I was in the choir and if we had stayed longer we were going to sing at the Eistedffod. When we had settled in our new billet I went each day to Port Talbot Secondary School and Godfrey went to the local Primary School. I even started to learn Welsh and even in my early 'teens the music in Wales was pure magic and remains so to

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this day.

My mother and youngest brother, in the meantime, had been evacuated to another part of Wales, to a farm near Carmarthen. During our stay in Wales they were able to come over and visit Godfrey and me.

Mr. and Mrs. Isaiah made us feel so much a part of their family and I shall be eternally grateful to them for their generous hospitality. In the fullness of time we were allowed back to Danehill and there we stayed until we were eventually allowed back to London.

SCHOOL

Things were difficult enough at school following the disturbed nights, and then the Germans started daylight bombing. We had no air raid shelter at the school; when the Germans came over we all got under the desks the best way we could.

During the summer of 1944, when the 'doodle' bombs started, the boys had to take it in turn to sit outside the school on watch; when they heard the noise of a bomb, they had to ring a hand bell - we all got under the desks. *Enid Wood,*

Going to school always carrying our gas mask in its cardboard box; occasionally wearing them to have a lesson; also the gas mask was tested at that time by putting a postcard over the airway; the mask should then pop by the ears.

With bombing raids on London becoming very serious, lots of children were evacuated to the countryside; at least 30 came to Danehill. The school became overcrowded and the Memorial Hall was used as an extra classroom. Children went to Danehill School from the age of 5 to 14; very few went on to East Grinstead Grammar School, even if you passed the 11+ exam, there were not enough places - because of the evacuees in the surrounding villages.

School dinner during the war must have been a nightmare for the cook, Miss Miles and her assistant Mrs. Gasson. Everything was rationed, with the help of dried egg and powdered milk and very little meat we survived. *(David Etherton)*

EVACUEES

My wife, Violet, was an evacuee who came down from Peckham with her brothers, Fred and Jim, and sister, Mary, to live with Mr. & Mrs. Wally Dixon at Beech Tree Cottage, next to the Police House; there was certainly a house full. *(David Etherton)*

(Five children of the Morris family of Peckham, were evacuated to Danehill in 1941).

Kathleen Wheeler, Evacuee

I was two years old when I came with my brothers and sister to live with Mr. & Mrs. Dixon. Later I was adopted by them and now regard myself as a 'Danehiller'. Another of my sisters was evacuated and lived with Mr. & Mrs. Percy Standing. I married a local man, Jack Wheeler.

The Dixons were friendly with a Brighton family, the Craggs, who had four daughters. One of the daughters, Rita, an invalid who had been a 'blue baby', used to stay with us during the summer. Rene, her sister, and her friend, Violet, often came for the weekend.

There were hundreds of Canadian soldiers around the village; sometimes a dozen or more were sitting on the lawn and the grass outside chatting up the girls. I can still remember some of them - Martin, blue eyes, blonde curly hair and a super smile, loved eating raw peas - given half a

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chance he would chomp his way through the whole pea row. Steven, another lovely man, very quiet and very keen on Rene, but in the end it was George Hamilton who won her heart; they were married in Brighton just before he went overseas. I don't think either Martin or Steven survived the war. Rene's friend, Violet, also married one of the Canadian soldiers. On sunny days, Rita, the invalid, used to sit outside in her wheelchair; a Canadian soldier was posted at the end of our path so that he could help wheel her in quickly should any enemy aircraft fly over.
(Violet Etherton)

(Rita was one of the first to be operated on to correct her heart problem she never married.)

When I came to Danehill, my sister, Mary, and I were at No. 5 Rose Cottages, next to the bakery. I think the greatest shock was the toilet halfway down the garden and no flushing. Water had to be drawn up in a bucket from a well.

Everything looked cleaner and bigger, as there was more space between the houses, and grass you could walk on without being shouted at. The grass behind the flats where we lived in London was surrounded by railings; only the caretaker was allowed on to mow it.

I remember the 'Shoveits nest' played on us townies by the village children. They would look into a hedge around bird nesting time and say "Look there's a Shoveits nest". When we went to look, we were pushed into the hedge.

The village children taught us how to slide on the ice in the school playground. Ice and snow that you got in the country was far different from the grey and watery slush of town. The two village ponds were used for sliding on when the ice would bear our weight. Cows, being driven down the road from one field to another, were a bit frightening, as most of us had never seen a cow before - big creatures with horns. There were the different sounds, especially at night, when everything sounded much clearer. The owls were a bit weird - took some getting used to.

You could run in the fields, go through the woods, go primrosing, blackberrying and chestnutting. You had a freedom town children never had. I remember Jean Newnham and Jean Baker teaching me to ride a bike in Freshfield Lane. Everything seemed cleaner, quieter - even the sun seemed brighter.
(Kathleen Wheeler)
