

AN EVACUEE'S WAR



TONY TOWNER

INTRODUCTION

**"Give me a child till the age of seven,
and I will give you the man"**

The following pages recall my early life: they are recollections as seen through the eyes of a boy aged 5 - 9 during the evacuation, and aged 9 - 11 post evacuation.

This is an attempt to place on record events that occurred, in the main, some 60 - 65 years ago, and while I've made every effort to present a true picture, due to my young age at the time, and the passing of many years, there may be some blurring at the edges.

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Dedicated to my family and the people
who cared for me during the war years.

Compiled with the helpful co-operation of
Gil Sykes and Nev James from the
Colton History Society, and the
East Kent Archives Centre.

PRE-EVACUATION

1939

September 1939 saw the start of the Second World War. Having reached the age of five just two months earlier, it also saw the start of my formal education.

Before this, my memories are vague images and snippets of conversations. None of this can be verified or elaborated on since it all happened some sixty five years ago, and all those who could help are long gone. One particular memory is of a windy Sunday afternoon on top of Folkestone's Sugar Loaf Hill and being almost bowled off my feet by fierce gusts of wind. And in another I recall my grandfather, having returned from a visit to Margate, telling my grandmother that the war had broken out.

My earliest memories stretch back a year or so earlier, to 1938 and living in Sandgate, on the Kent coast between Hythe and Folkestone. It was there that my sister, Primrose, was born in April 1936, and it was almost certainly there that we lived for a while in a newly built house in Oakley Hook Close. It was also there that she fell out of an upstairs bedroom window, astonishingly suffering only minor injury to an ankle. I have always felt guilty regarding this early drama in our lives, for in my innocence I had suggested that she should attempt flying down the garden path, little thinking she would do so. Knowledge of the suggestion was withheld from my parents, and Primrose never held the episode against me.



Summer holiday - pre-evacuation

Sometime after, we moved to Folkestone to a first floor flat in Cheriton High Street. It was there that I have my first memory of food – a very salty scrambled egg. Likewise, my first memory of sickness – chickenpox, which was to have a profound effect on my war years. It was Cheriton High Street that we were living in during September 1939.

I do not remember the name of my first school or anything about it other than the excitement generated by my mother on the first day. From the start things were thrown into disarray with the arrival of evacuees from London. Bizarre! From London to the Kent coast, nearer to France and the Germans! The effect of this on the school was that the local children attended classes in the morning and the evacuees in the afternoon, or vice versa.

Following the bout of chickenpox my sister and I went to stay with our maternal grandparents who lived in a large house in Mordant Avenue, Westgate-on-Sea. They had a large black and white dog with long hair called Fluffy that had belonged to my mother. It died shortly after our arrival and was duly buried under a cherry tree in the garden. The grave is now under the southbound carriageway of the Canterbury Road.

Our stay in Westgate became extended. It was a happy time: winkle-picking as we were fairly close to the beach; playing with our grandfather, a kind, gentle man, and the dog. Grandmother, on the other hand, was a severe, cool lady. Time passed and still we stayed on in Westgate. Why? I do not know.

Then it was decided to enrol us at the local Elm Grove primary school. Additionally, Primrose was enrolled at a Salvation Army school on the corner of St. Mildred's Road and Sea Road, a school which took boarders and day pupils, and so by June 1940 we were attending different schools in Westgate.



Westgate 1940 - Tony front left, Primrose, far right with bow

My only other memory of this period was with our mother, having collected Primrose from school one afternoon, fleeing for shelter as an air raid siren sounded the likely arrival of German war planes. We had been strolling along St. Mildred's Road which was lined on both sides with military vehicles packed nose to tail. Until that time I had no real knowledge or experience of the war, although of course we were not far from terrible events happening just across the Channel at Dunkirk.

1940

By early June 1940 the deteriorating war situation was to change the pattern of our lives yet again, and we were to be evacuated like the London children who had been sent to Folkestone. I have often wondered to where those children were re-evacuated. So, at the tender ages of four and five my sister and I were parted for almost four years, seeing each other only for short holidays as the war situation improved. She went to Parr in Cornwall with the Salvation Army school, to a strict regime that with the benefit of hindsight was far too severe for a tot of four; and I, to Staffordshire.

EVACUATION

1940-1943

Sunday, June 2nd 1940 opened a new chapter in my life. It also closed one: it was the last time my father played a significant part in it, for by the end of my evacuation he had been killed – not by the war, but by lung cancer.

That day was also the last I was to see of Westgate and Mordant Avenue for 62 years. When I did return for a brief visit in 2002 the school building had been converted into old people's flats and replaced by a larger, modern school nearby, and my grandparents' house demolished to make way for road improvements. The Salvation Army school building was vacant, dilapidated and appeared to have been used for a time as a residential home, whilst the grounds had been reduced in size for house development.

The evacuation came upon us suddenly. My parents may have had a little advanced notice, but I only remember being at school one day and being lined up with all the other children on the railway platform the next.

Details are vague: a cardboard lapel label; a gas-mask in a cardboard box; and a few, a very few belongings. There were not the tears and sadness that I have seen in other evacuee departures. No doubt they were there, as elsewhere, but my only recollection is of a long train journey with many delays that was lonely despite the company of other children and teachers. I was too young to take it all in. Had I been older, it may well have been a different story. I knew nothing of other places, distances, or time, other than a whole day without anyone from my family being an eternity. Staffordshire, had I known that was where we were going, could have been on the moon.

Three trains left the Kent seaside resort of Margate that day taking evacuees to Staffordshire. The third stopped at Westgate-on-Sea where it picked up 89 children, of whom I was one. Its destination was Lichfield, where we were all inspected by the local county council medical officers before continuing our journey by coach to the village of Colton, to St. Mary's Village School. At the school we trundled into the hall, the principal if not the only classroom, and were told to sit on the floor. There, puzzled and weary we awaited our fate.

Shortly after, women from the village appeared, and one by one children were singled out and taken away, until just two or three of us remained. Then a kindly lady came and gently led me away, out of the school. A long walk took us to her house, Margaret Eva Cottage, which was to be my home for the next three years. There, I was told to sit on a chair in front of a black range fire, which I did, only to be startled as the chair tipped back violently under my weight, and then forward, and back again. It was my first experience of a rocking chair. We all laughed, probably my first laugh that day, and a warm introduction to the family.

I learnt sometime later that Mrs Norman (Lily) and her husband (Lig – a derivation of Elijah) had no intention of taking in an evacuee. She had been to the school out of curiosity and had watched as the number of evacuees left without a host family dwindled to just a few. Then her motherly instincts had taken over, and I was the beneficiary. It was a remarkable gesture for she had three sons of her own, one of whom, Colin, was a baby about one year old. The other two were Walter and Bob, aged twelve and eighteen respectively. I was to know Colin and Walter (Watty) well, although there were large age differences between us. It was very different with Bob, who a few months after my arrival on the scene was to be called-up for service in the Royal Air Force. He served much of his time in India and after the war returned to spend most of his working life there.

As I look back over some sixty five years I am reminded how different things were then, and yet they were the norm for a large proportion of the population. My new home had no running water. All drinking and cooking water was drawn from a well shared with two neighbours. Washing water came from the roof, run-off into, and taken from, a rain-water butt. There were advantages and disadvantages - the well water was cool, fresh and unchlorinated, although occasionally the ascending bucket would contain a frog; but its acquisition was a laborious task that had to be carried out daily by Mr Norman after arriving home from work. Washing water was free from all earthly contaminants and hence "soft" and easily lathered, but was difficult to rinse off, especially as the water supply was usually limited - and even more so in the dry months of summer.

Personal washing, food preparation, washing up and laundry was carried out in a bare, back room that contained a stone sink, a coal fired boiler for washing clothes etc, a mangle, and little else. Bathing took place in the living room in a galvanised iron bath in front of the fire, where coal burnt continuously, providing not only the principal source of heating, but constant hot water, and heat for the adjacent oven.

The living room was the only habitable room for all six of us, which meant that a fairly strict domestic timetable was necessary, particularly at bedtime. It was in that room that I learnt to tell the time from a wall clock which was permanently set half an hour fast – so we would never be late going anywhere. It took me some time, later on, to adjust to telling the time correctly. There was a second room, as large as the living room, but it had unpapered walls and was totally empty except for a couple of bicycles, and was never used whilst I lived there. Upstairs there were two bedrooms, one of which I shared with the two boys.

A call of nature was always difficult to cope with as there was no inside lavatory. A brick structure containing a wooden frame and seat over a removable bucket was situated in the garden, not just outside, but some fifty yards away. This involved a long walk in all weathers passed the front of a neighbouring house. It was a creepy place even in daylight. At night, without lights (there was a war on!) it was frightening and thoroughly unpleasant. It hardly needs saying that one was prepared to suffer considerable discomfort before submitting to a call.

It was permitted however that all members of the family could participate in lesser calls in the doorless coal shed on cold, dark evenings, provided care was taken to avoid the well en route. The toilet visits were made more problematical by the blackout. Great care was necessary with lighting during the hours of darkness. Windows were heavily curtained with black material and torches were shaded. Whilst on the subject of lighting, the property did have one major modern feature: electricity supply.

The working day was often long and arduous, as Mr Norman's routine shows. He rose early, checked that the fire was still alight, added fuel to it, cycled some three miles into Rugeley to catch the 'Pit' bus by six thirty which took him another five or six miles to the colliery at Hednesford, ready to commence work at seven. That continued until early afternoon. He then reversed the journey home.

On arrival, his first task was to draw the next day's water requirement from the well. Then a strip wash to remove the coal dust and grime of his labours, there being no pit baths at the colliery, which during restrictions, I believe, gave rise to an additional soap allowance. He would then have his dinner. After dinner, depending on the time of the year, he would set to work in one or other of his two large vegetable gardens, this being the time of the "Dig for Victory" campaign when food was scarce and the whole population was urged to provide additional food to feed itself. Flowers made way for edible produce.

On Thursdays, when Mrs Norman visited Rugeley to get the week's provisions, only some of which she could manage to take home, he would interrupt his homeward journey to collect the remainder and convey it somehow to Colton on his bicycle. Most of the morning journeys were in darkness necessitating the use of a cycle lamp. This was a large object without batteries or bulbs, containing calcium carbide which created acetylene gas when water was added. The gas was lit to provide light. It also gave off a noxious smell.

As time passed and I grew older I learnt about the village and its location: two to three miles north of the nearest town, Rugeley; a similar distance from Colwich, where the older village children were sent to school; and ten miles from Stafford, the County Town. South of Rugeley was Cannock Chase and Hednesford, where I was to spend several months many years later square-bashing as a Royal Air Force conscript doing National Service.

Colton, then, was simply a village strung out along two streets; Bellamour Way and the High Street, that met to form a right angle; at which point it was joined by a road from the village of Blithbury. The limits of the village were St. Mary's Church and the school at the west end of Bellamour Way, and Ye Old Dun Cow public house at the north end of the High Street. I was always puzzled by the pub's name – Dun Cow. What was done to the cow, and who done it? It was a long time before I discovered that the old cow was coloured brown! The High Street just beyond the public house forked left to the hamlet of Stockwell Heath, and right to I knew not where.

I remember Colton as having no centre or focal point. I do not recall there being any public buildings; a village hall for instance, or a second public house. Maybe I was too young to know of the latter, if it existed. There were two shops at the road junction, but one, Uptons, was permanently closed and the other, a tiny sweet shop run by Miss Williscroft, who owned a black Austin 7 motor car. There was a large house, Colton House, near the school that had been commandeered by the military for the duration of the war. On the other side of the road, opposite the house, was a wooded area with a small lake, known as the Plantation. There was another area of water, a pond, at the top/north end of the village to which I will refer again later.

Physical features were a brook near the school where in summertime we children sometimes paddled near the road bridge, and to the south east of the village,

Martlin Hill. There, on occasions when I was older, we played war games wearing helmets and balaclavas and with sticks as rifles. What we were going to do to Hitler if we ever caught him was quite frightening!

Two other major properties I recall were the nearby manor farm, Little Hay Manor, owned by the Mellor family. The Mellors had a son, Luke, and a younger daughter, Mary who would be taken to school, sometimes, sitting primly in a buggy drawn by a trotting pony. That farm comes into my mind's eye now-a-days whenever I hear mention of the Archer's farm on the radio. The other property was the old slaughter house where we sometimes played.

The Norman's home was towards the top end of the High Street, on the left hand side. It shared a gate and path with two other properties, Holly Cottage and Rowan Cottage. In one lived an elderly gentleman by the name of Ravenscroft who occasionally gave me a few pence to spend. In the other lived a couple by the name of Cooper. I should point out that the names are as I remember them pronounced, and may not be spelt correctly. Close by was The Row, a terrace of half a dozen houses. One was occupied by the Talbots, two by families called Myatt, one by another Norman family, and one by a family of ten children named Yates. I do not recall who lived in the sixth.

Schooling features little in my recollection. I have a feeling that I was not one of the brightest of pupils and remember little of lessons, but I do recall learning to knit: we produced six inch woollen squares to be used as dishcloths! The headmaster, Mr Broughton, was Dickensian: wing-collared, humourless and extremely handy with the cane. I remember being terrified and astounded by two of his teachings which turned out to be only partially correct – drinking vinegar dries up the blood (I liked vinegar), and the fastest things on earth are London trains that run in dark tunnels underground.

I also recall sitting on the floor in the previously mentioned hall - on one wall was a large map of Europe and North Africa, and from time to time Mr Broughton gave us reports of the war situation. With a long pointer he would indicate the latest advances and retreats through Libya and then the push through Tunisia, the pincer move formed by the advance of the US army from the west, and the German withdrawal to Sicily and Italy with the allies in hot pursuit. I became familiar with the names of the allied military commanders at a very early age.

A feature of my schooling was the physical exercise required to get there and back. It was a long walk in both directions, twice a day, for there was no such thing then as school dinners. Dinner time saw us having to get home and back in one and a half hours, and involved very brisk walking for little legs, often trying to keep pace with Mr Willis, our head teacher from Westgate. This required strict time tabling for Mrs Norman and the other village mothers and evacuee hostesses. With all the exercise and food rationing there were no fat children. We had a daily mid-morning bottle of milk that cost one half penny (one four hundred and eightieth of a pound). Once a week I was given a penny as I left for school. That day, the second half penny was spent in the sweetshop purchasing my two ounce weekly sweet ration.

After school, we would have an early tea, usually bread and jam or toast cooked on the prongs of a toasting fork held at arm's length in front of the bars of the fire. During the winter months we would sit round the dining table listening to the BBC radio programmes on the wireless, a wooden, veneered box with an illuminated panel and two dials on the front, above which the shape of its speaker could be seen behind cane-like fabric. In the back was an accumulator, its power source: a glass container inside which was sulphuric acid and lead plates that required recharging weekly.

The news bulletins were the main source of information concerning the state of the war, and were listened to avidly, as were the football results on Saturday evenings in the hope that Mr Norman would get three draws up on the Pools. Tender years and an overcrowded room meant that my bedtime came early. At other times, especially during the summer months of double summertime when the clocks were put forward two hours instead of the one now-a-days, I was allowed to play outside and bedtime came much later, there being little point sending children to bed early when it was still daylight at eleven in the evening.



Tony (right) with June Myatt & Colin Norman

My playmates and friends were mainly neighbouring village children. Our games were usually held in the High Street which had very little traffic and was therefore relatively safe, or in the nearby fields. As time passed and we became more adventurous, I took to tree climbing and country pursuits generally frowned upon today: bird nesting, collecting eggs, blowing them, and snaring rabbits. Some friends, names come to mind: Doreen Eaton, Victor and Eleanor Hardcastle and June Myatt, my nearest friend, whose mother angrily rebuked us both on one occasion when June, at home in bed recovering from an appendix operation, was caught innocently showing me her fresh scar. Strangely, I recall only a few evacuees, and cannot give a name to a single one.

Saturdays often entailed a bus trip into Rugeley. Buses ran only twice a day, and only Saturdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. The Saturday visits were for shopping, sometimes cinema outings, and occasionally to see the doctor. One memorable outing was to the circus; a totally new and exciting experience where I laughed long at the clowns' antics and wondered at the strange animals, knowing that some had come from Africa, the Dark Continent, which I understood to be totally covered by dense, impenetrable jungle, and peopled with black, hostile natives. On another occasion I recall seeing a Spitfire fighter plane on display accompanied by airmen with collection boxes to aid the war effort.

During the autumn of 1940 my parents and grandparents evacuated themselves to Reading in Berkshire. Grandfather and grandmother obtained a flat above a Salvation Army premises in Kings Road where they continued to live until 1943, when he died. Grandmother then moved to Kent to be near her sisters, who lived in the village of Leigh.

My parents initially had temporary accommodation with a Mrs Brooks who lived in Oxford Street in Caversham, the area of Reading north of the River Thames. She was a friendly soul with a ready but terrifying smile. The possessor of a full set of ill-fitting upper dentures that dropped onto her lower teeth with a clatter whenever she opened her mouth to speak, resulting in a ghoulish grin and embarrassed fumbling.

Mother and father stayed there for a short while before moving to more permanent accommodation with a Mrs Bune in Eastern Avenue. Often she was there on her own as father was employed at Didcot, where he managed a large army camp NAFFI. Like my grandparents, they stayed at their new address until, again like my grandfather, my father died in the summer of 1943.

1940 came to a close with a Christmas visit to Colton. Mother and father coming for a brief reunion with me amid tears and hugs, no doubt wishing to be acquainted with my surrogate mother and her family, who in turn must have been curious about them. I remember little of the occasion other than father providing a bottle of whisky and the adults enjoying laced cups of tea. Fortunately, they all got on well, and the two women remained in friendly contact until Mrs Norman died during the late fifties.

My recollections of specific activities during 1941 are few, bearing in mind that I was still only six and seven years of age, and mainly relate to the summer holidays and to Christmas.

The summer of that year I was to take the first of several solo journeys to Reading that I made during my stay in Colton. As I look back, it seems remarkable that during wartime, with the country bristling with servicemen, unreliable train services and potential danger all around, I should have taken such a journey at the age of just seven. In today's world my parents, both real and surrogate, could well be accused of negligence, but then we lived in a very different world, when things had to be done in anyway possible, and alternatives were few.

At Rugeley there were two railway stations: Trent Valley, on the London Midland and Scottish Railway (LMS), and Rugeley Town. My journey was in two stages: the first, from the Town station to Birmingham accompanied by Mrs Norman, and the second, from there to Reading. The distance to Birmingham was some twenty five miles and passed through the South Staffordshire Coalfield where for the first time I saw the black, conical hills of coal slag – waste from mining, which are now long gone, but that often blighted village communities with their over-powering presence. At Birmingham, the journey became complicated by the need to change

stations, from Snow Hill on the LMS line to New Street on the Great Western Railway (GWR). I clearly recall scenes of smoking buildings, damaged or demolished by the previous night's German bombing raids that urged us swiftly on our way.

Mrs Norman could take me no further, for she needed to be back home to look after her own family, so the onward journey was made on my own. As on the day of the evacuation, I had a brown luggage label in my lapel with my name and destination inscribed. I was then placed in the care of the train guard, which entailed travelling in the van with the guard, a not very comfortable arrangement, but with him as company. On other occasions, I sat in a nearby compartment where he could keep an eye on me, looking in from time to time. Sometimes, there were fellow travellers who would chat with me, other times not, and I would sit and study the pictures of seaside resorts adorning the compartment walls. They were always there, usually different, luring passengers to new, fascinating locations. At Didcot, where my father worked, he would meet me, and from there we would travel on to Reading together. I made that journey again later that year, going home for Christmas.

That venture was the start of a holiday in which we were to be reunited as a family for the first time in over a year, and the reunion took place in Torquay, to where my parents and I travelled by train a few days later. The day after our arrival father journeyed to Parr near St Austell, collected my sister from her school and returned to join mother and me. The rest of the holiday is only a vague memory.



Torquay 1941

December that year saw me back in Reading briefly for Christmas. As it turned out Christmas Day was spent in the village of Blackham in East Sussex at my paternal grandparents' home. Father had borrowed a car and he drove mother and me there from Reading on Christmas morning, an icy cold day that caused the car to freeze up before the return journey. Primrose was not with us; she was still at school in Parr. This visit provided my first recollection of meeting my father's parents and family, whose rural home in many ways resembled mine in Colton.

During 1941 and 1942 I suffered several colds and childhood illnesses including measles and scarlet fever. The later resulted in me being ambulated away to an isolation hospital – so isolated that I still do not know where it was. Sufficient to say, I was lonely while there and very pleased when I eventually returned to Colton.

During 1942 medical opinion was that my tonsils needed to be removed. The operation was duly carried out at Stafford Infirmary - an experience not to be recommended. Taken to the operating theatre, I was stripped to the waist and laid on the operating table on a cold rubber sheet. Here I was briefly left alone, save for the glass cabinets around me containing silver surgical instruments that looked like implements of torture. Lying flat, I espied through the port-holed doors the masked surgeon; then from behind me and without warning something was clasped over my nose and breathing became impossible. Surprised and frightened, I fought desperately and succeeded in throwing the object away. It was an inverted cup-shaped metal frame with gauze dressed over it, on to which was dripped chloroform. The second attempt to put me out was successful, but required several pairs of hands to hold down my arms and legs.

After the operation, I came to with an extremely sore throat and in a bed sandwiched between two others containing similarly treated boys who were noisily crying. Unhappy and in pain I joined the chorus. Clearly, this was long before the days of counselling!

My visit to the infirmary was one of few excursions beyond the village and Rugeley that I experienced. I do remember going to Milford on Cannock Chase, and to Uttoxeter on a couple of occasions where Mrs Norman's parents had a bungalow, and to Stoke on Trent. The last visit was to relatives for the day. I recall that they had a violin, a musical instrument unknown to me. But what stays most in my mind was viewing Stoke lying below us as we approached it by road, not so much seeing the city, but the hazy brown industrial cloud that hung low and heavy over it.

Three experiences about this time come to mind, and all took place in part of the village known as Bank Top. None of them are particularly noteworthy, but they give a flavour of childhood in a village community during the war.

The first was seeing a Shire horse, immaculately groomed with plaited mane and tail, shining reins and brasses, being led on its way to a show. For me this was a one-off occasion, but it may well have been a regular occurrence.

The second was witnessing a large party of Italian prisoners of war en route to a day's work, probably in the fields. They were on foot, only casually guarded and very friendly, chatting in broken English with us children. They had been captured in the North African campaign that we had followed on the school map, and we understood them to be happier being prisoners than fighting with their German allies. We saw them several times and they gave the girls in our group gifts – simple rings made in their spare time from perspex.

The third experience had a more dramatic outcome. Two or three young lads made a trolley - a large box on four perambulator wheels with an extended wooden shaft that led to two forward wheels which, in theory, could be turned by a rope to steer the vehicle. As it neared completion Mrs Norman got wind of the project and forbade me to have anything to do with it, which was just as well, for on the trolley's one and only outing - down Bank Top hill - it crashed at speed, resulting in casualties, with one lad being detained in hospital badly injured.

The summer of 1942 saw another train journey to Reading for a holiday. There, my sister and I spent much of our time with my grandparents in the Kings Road flat. Grandfather was always entertaining and good company, but there was still a war on with the accompanying food rationing and other shortages. At times, combating shortages had to take precedence over pleasure pursuits.

An example of this was the daily collection of coke. Lorries taking fuel from the railway coal yard to the gas works - always overloaded to maximise the use of petrol - passed nearby. Grandfather knew their route and midmorning would see us, with a wheelbarrow, gathering coke that spilled off the lorries as they took a bend in the Forbury Road. It was usual for us to return home with sufficient fuel for the day, absolutely free.

Christmas that year was at Colton. Mother and father came for a couple of days that turned out to be eventful in more ways than one. Christmas Eve, if I remember correctly, was the day that the war came to the village, assisted by the tipsy driver of a brewery lorry delivering supplies to Ye Old Dun Cow.

At that time vehicles on the road after dark were required to have shaded or hooded headlights, sufficient only to illuminate the road just ahead to prevent being seen by enemy aircraft overhead. That evening, the lorry's driver, who was lost and delivering late, possibly as a result of earlier imbibing, turned into the village from Colton Road (the road from Rugeley) at a spot near Bellamour Lodge where a large slit trench had been dug in the grass verge to defend Colton in the event of an invasion. Taking the bend badly, the lorry mounted the verge and finished up with its back wheels well down into the trench, its headlights beaming skywards, and there it stayed, stuck.

Attracted by the upward beam, a lone passing German bomber dropped a string of bombs, presumably at the innocent target. There could have been no other reason for the bombing other than, maybe, the nearby railway line, but that had never before, or again to my knowledge, been a target. Fortunately, all the bombs missed the lorry and the village, falling into several fields close by, in some instances two in the same field. The exact number I do not know, but I understood it to be up to a dozen. They turned out to be incendiaries, some of which failed to explode.

The following day, Christmas Day, parents and I sat down at the table with the Norman family ready to commence lunch, but Watty was missing. By this time he was a lively fifteen year old who had been out of the house all morning. As the rest of us were about to begin eating he appeared breathless and excited and with a flourish placed a cylindrical object, about eighteen inches high, upright on the centre of the table, announcing that it was from a nearby field. It was one of the bombs! One that had failed to explode. Its presence was greeted with horror and panic as we hastily abandoned the table, returning only after the bomb had been removed, well away from the house, and Watty had been thoroughly chastised.

1943 was a landmark year: one during which my father and maternal grandfather died, both relatively young. At the age of forty my father's death must have been especially traumatic for my mother and his parents, but both deaths passed me by almost unnoticed. Father's was to have a profound effect on my future life and, indeed, that of my mother and sister. No doubt the news, and that of his prior illness, had been kept from me for fear of causing distress, but through circumstances beyond his control he had been an absent father for much of my life, one with whom I had little contact and of whom I have only a few memories.

Winters, then, were always accompanied by heavy falls of snow and thick ice. Jack Frost visited homes overnight leaving the inside of windows opaque with varied and beautiful ice patterns; and dripping rainwater gutters with long icicles. 1943 started with such weather conditions, and they almost led to another tragedy: my death!

One morning shortly after Christmas, with frost heavy on the trees and thick in the fields, I was one of a group of boys of mixed ages playing aimlessly when it was suggested that we should go sliding on the pond near the top end of the village. Some of us, me in particular, were reluctant, having been forbidden to go anywhere near the ice. Nevertheless, we did and the ice turned out to be thick, and took our weight without any suggestion of danger.

Two slides were formed, one across the pond and another alongside for the return. Boredom and cold gave way to fun and warmth, but when three of us fell in a heap, the ice broke. The other two managed to scramble away as a hole opened up, but I fell through the ice and into the freezing cold water. Attempts to get out were fruitless due to water, displaced by my body, lapping the ice. My fingers simply slid off as I tried to grip the edges. I went completely under, now with a heavy wet coat, gulping pond water as I gasped for breath, I was unable to help myself.

I do not recall fear as such, just surprise; but I do remember thinking that I would not see my parents again. Understandably, the other children hastily retreated from the ice and I was left isolated. Fortunately help was at hand in the form of Vic Hardcastle, who ventured back onto the ice with a broken tree branch. At arm's

length he thrust it in my direction urging me to grab it. At the second attempt I managed to do so, and there we stayed, the two of us both grimly clutching each end of the branch unable to move, until others, urged on by Vic, crept onto the ice and helped him pull me from the hole and across the ice, sliding on my stomach .

Somehow the group got me, wet and shivering violently with cold, back home - where I was given a hot bath in front of the fire and put to bed with a stone hot water bottle. There I remained for a couple of days to recover.

Without doubt, Vic saved my life that day. Shortly after the event I rewarded him with a gift of two shillings and six pence, all my remaining Christmas pocket money! Mrs Norman was surprisingly tolerant of my disobedience, only gently rebuking me.

The episode left me with a double legacy. For a long time after, whilst running or during heavy exercise, puffing for breath, I would experience a faint taste of the pond water; and secondly, the occasional nightmare. When these occurred I would experience drowning as my head slipped under water. I would usually awake, tearing at the top sheet which I had pulled up over my face as I slept, smothering me.

By early 1943 the threat of an invasion had long passed: the Germans had turned eastwards and attacked Russia instead; and the bombing was less intense than earlier during the war. As a consequence many of my fellow evacuees had left Colton, and those who remained were a dwindling band. At times I wondered why I was still there, and when my turn would come to return home, especially as I was able to holiday in Reading and elsewhere from time to time.

Those who had left still had homes to go to in Westgate. In my case, my parents had no fixed home, just two rooms, having moved away from Kent in 1940. No doubt, mother would have had problems with father's deteriorating health, and the need to earn a living. Later, after he died, her circumstances and the wish to have Primrose and me closer to her must have caused great concern. As the year passed and with a changing situation in Colton, the matter was resolved and so, 1943 was to be my last evacuee year.

During the early summer the Norman family, with the addition of my presence, were outgrowing their accommodation, and it was decided that I would have to be relocated elsewhere. I was consulted about where in the village I would like to go and with whom I might like to stay. I opted for Mrs Alice Meddings, who lived opposite the old slaughter house in Webb's Row. She was a widow with an eighteen years old son, Ted, who was due soon for call-up. A familiar friendly figure who was to be seen daily in the village pedalling on a large, lady's sit-up-and-beg bicycle to, and from, the school where she undertook cleaning after school hours. She already had two other evacuees staying with her, but nevertheless agreed to take me under her wing.

Life with the Meddings was quiet different: I now had similar aged house-mates for a few months, until they in turn returned to Westgate, and there was more of a work regime than I had with the Normans. This is not to say that I was bullied or overworked – far from it. In fact, the six months or so that I spent there were generally very enjoyable, but after Ted was conscripted, and without a husband, Mrs Meddings needed help to keep things ticking over. So, I was involved in the gardening, weekly cleaning out the chicken run, fruit picking and a thousand and one jobs, most of which were not too demanding, and often fun, although I recall that chicken guano had a distinctly unpleasant odour!

In the autumn of that year I was introduced to the back-breaking experience of potato-picking. All able bodied children were expected to spend some time during the week's half term holiday participating in this war effort. Our reward was the payment of the princely sum of six old pence per day.

The task was basically very simple. At the start of the operation, each child was given a measured length between two stakes around the perimeter of a field of potatoes. As the tractor circled the crop, turning the soil and revealing the new potatoes, so we gathered them. To start, it took a while for the tractor to come round again, but as the day progressed and the field of unpicked potatoes shrank, it came round sooner each time, until towards the end of the session it seemed to be back before one was able to gather all the exposed potatoes from the previous round. Despite the reduced length of our individual plots with each passing, by the end, the picking became frantic and utterly exhausting.

Prior to the potato picking, the summer of 1943 saw another visit to Reading, and a brief holiday in Cornwall to where mother and I journeyed to holiday with Primrose. She remained at her Salvation Army school in Parr, but was permitted to spend some time each day with us. I seem to remember that mother thought the school authorities were unreasonable and obstructive, and it is likely that their actions influenced her in deciding to bring our periods of evacuation to an end, which came about in November of that year.

It was almost certainly in Reading during that particular holiday that I first saw someone of Asian origin, in fact it was not just one person, but many. Until then my only experience of seeing people who weren't white had been in films at the cinema, and they were usually tribal natives or red Indians in B category US films. These men were a contingent of smartly uniformed and khaki turbaned Indian soldiers, lined up on Reading station platform. Their presence caused great excitement, for it was truly a novel sight, at a time when most of the population, especially in rural communities, had rarely seen dark or black skinned people. That situation gradually changed as the war progressed and US military personnel were stationed here in Britain in increasing numbers; but it was not until after the war, and into the fifties, that Britain was not to be almost exclusively white.

Recording my holidays and associated travels may give the impression that I was a very confident youngster. Nothing could be further from the truth. Basically, I was a country boy, brought up in a fairly quiet village, protected by caring people, sheltered from a troubled world, and the possessor of a painful shyness that took many years to shake off. An example of which occurred during the holiday in Reading, when mother proudly introduced me to the manager of a ladies' outfitter shop where she worked. A stout, forceful lady, she thrust a generous gift of a half crown coin into my hand. Terrified, I immediately fled from the shop, and was some hundred yards into the crowded main street before being caught by my distraught mother.

Shortly after the October half term and the potato-picking I learnt that my stay in Colton was soon to end. By then mother had moved from Reading, and was living in the Bushey area of Watford; having moved there during the late summer. Furthermore, Mrs Norman was no longer directly involved in my life, and so an alternative arrangement was required for the final departure from Colton.

Now, still only nine years of age, I set off on another train journey, again with lapel label; but using a different route: from Rugeley Trent Valley station to Rugby, and thence to Watford, all the way in the care of the railway guards. Yet it did not run as smoothly as the previous journeys to Reading.

The first leg was slow with several delays, resulting in a late arrival in Rugby where I was due to change trains. The guard, in whose care I had been placed, rushed me to the adjacent platform, and hurried me onto a London-bound train that was about to leave, and squeezed me into a compartment full of sailors returning home on leave. The sailors were friendly, even giving me sweets. So far, so good. Then the ticket collector - the guard who should have been looking after me, but who did not even know that I was on board the train - came to inspect our tickets. Studying mine, he announced that I was on the wrong train - this one was an express to London, not stopping at Watford. Consternation all round!

Tears flowed, followed by more sweets! Then, one of my companions remembered that somewhere on the train was a shipmate who was returning home to Watford, and set off along the train to find him. He returned after a while, telling me that all was well and not to worry. At Euston, he handed me over to his colleague, who took care of me until we had completed our journey, back along part of the route we had already covered.

My arrival in Watford was a couple of hours late, by which time my mother was frantic with worry, although she had been told of my situation by the Watford station master: he had received a telephone message from the train guard on our arrival at Euston. Not knowing where I was, and if I was ever going to turn up, she was greatly relieved. We hugged each other hugely; and so ended my life as an evacuee.

Thinking about my evacuation, I look back to the Norman family and Mrs Meddings with admiration and gratitude for taking into their homes a very young boy who "spoke funny" with a Kent accent. No doubt I must have caused them problems, anxiety and possibly anger at times, but I only recall being made welcome and their kindness. The only complaint I recall Mrs Norman voicing was a result of her agitation at the rate at which I wore out my shoes, and her requesting extra money from my mother for new ones.

I could not have had two better homes in which to stay.

POST EVACUATION

1943-1945

November 1943 saw the end of my evacuation, but not the end of the war: fighting continued for another eighteen months before it ceased in Europe, and for a further three months in Asia.

My stay in Bushey was brief, less than twenty-four hours to be precise, for the day following my journey from Colton mother and I travelled to Reading by train and thence by bus five miles north into the south Oxfordshire countryside, to the village of Peppard, to a residential school. It turned out that the end of evacuation did not mean coming home. It simply meant being nearer to home, especially when mother returned to live in Reading some six months later. Shortly after, Primrose joined me at the school, but we still saw little of each other as, except in class, boys and girls were kept well apart, and due to our age difference of twenty-one months, we were always in different classes.

The school was situated between the villages of Peppard and the macabrely named Gallows Tree Common at an isolated location called Bishopswood Farm Camp. This was one of some thirty similar establishments set up by the National Camps Corporation. Established before the war, they were intended to provide city children short residential stays in the country, combining experience of community life with opportunities for self development and leadership, contributing to the improvement of their general health and wellbeing. They were ready-made homes for groups or whole schools of evacuees.

At Bishopswood, it was the latter. The school was the Alexandra Orphanage. It had been evacuated from London, and so, in a sense, I became an evacuee again. Eventually, the school merged with another to become the Royal Alexandra and Albert School. Primrose and I were to spend the remaining war years there, and a further two and a half years until, in 1947, mother remarried.

The school had the appearance of a holiday camp; comprising, in the main, large single storey timber buildings, the exception being the headmaster's house and office which was a brick built bungalow. There were three dormitories; each approximately one hundred feet long accommodating some fifty boys, near to which was a toilet block serving all one hundred and fifty boys. This required a strict programme for personal washing every morning and evening, and for showers twice weekly. Likewise, there were two dormitories for the girls, which were well away from those of the boys, on the opposite side of the site.

The classrooms, dining hall and school hall formed a semicircle around one half of a large circular lawn with a flag pole at the centre. The lawn was totally forbidden territory, except on the annual sports day, when we children gave team displays of club swinging to the assembled parents. There was a large playing field that fell gently away to the south with extensive views in the direction of Reading. The school was bordered on one side by a wood and a large vegetable garden (we still had to Dig for Victory – one afternoon every week, usually Monday, was devoted to this task). Opposite the front of the school was a much larger wood, the Bishop's Wood, that seemed unending, and here at weekends, when I was older and allowed out of school unaccompanied by an adult, we boys would spend hours exploring.

My four years at Bishopswood was not a very happy time, but the school played a prominent part in shaping my life, giving me a respect for discipline and sensible authority, as well as national pride. It developed in me a requirement for things to be orderly and arranged with everything in its proper place, and I often recall the expression frequently heard then, "If a job's worth doing, boy, it's worth doing well".

From the carefree homely life in Colton I was now under a strict regime, rigidly controlled along military lines, with one of the house masters known only as Sergeant (he had been such in the cavalry in the 1914-1918 war). We boys never knew his surname. A system of control that employed monitors and prefects led to an element of bullying, but the worst offender was Sergeant, who treated us like army recruits. In that respect he did me a favour, for when I was conscripted into the Royal Air Force in 1952, the bullying discipline of square-bashing that distressed so many caused me few problems.

The three dormitories housed boys according to their ages, 8-10, 10-12, 12-15. Progression from lower to higher was dependant on the number of fifteen year olds who left the school at any one time, triggering off a chain of promotion to ensure that the two senior dormitories were fully accommodated, leaving vacancies in the junior for new entrants. Promotion to a higher dormitory was anticipated with mixed feelings – pleasure with the seniority and associated privileges, but fear of the christening ceremony that everyone had to undergo.

A typical day commenced with rising at 6.30 am, stripping the bedding completely from our two tier bunk beds, half-folding the mattress, neatly folding the blankets and sleeping-bag sheet and pillow-case, placing them neatly one upon another with the pillow placed on top. These were placed on the end of the bunk, all neatly squared off, along military lines, ready for inspection. At 6.45 we paraded still in pyjamas and dressing gown to the toilet block, regardless of the weather and time of the year. After washing, back to the dormitory, to dress and clean our shoes and be ready for the inspection at 7.30, when we all stood to attention at the foot of our respective bunks. The house-master would then pass along the row allocating points for neatness and turn out. Each dormitory was divided into three houses, and individual points were added to house totals, so a poor turn out and low points made one distinctly unpopular with his house captain and fellow house members.

Then followed fifteen to twenty minuets until breakfast. This period was spent out of doors, unless rain was falling, usually standing around on a tarmac area that had at one time been the hard tennis courts, often in winter shivering with cold. In those days boys still wore short trousers until the ages of twelve or thirteen, leaving exposed knees subject to the winter cold, and more likely to accidental injury.

Breakfast was at 8.00 am, on the dot, but 9.00 on Sunday when we were all given an extra hour in bed. For me it was the highlight of the day, commencing with porridge (shredded wheat on Sundays), then one round of crispy fried bread accompanied by baked beans, or fried or scrambled powdered egg. The lunches were another story. They were simply awful: often fatty mince, stew with chewy meat, cabbage, hard chunks of turnips or swede, and lumpy mashed potato. Desserts were invariably milk puddings, either semolina, macaroni or tapioca which I detested. Sometimes, a stodgy syrup pudding or spotted dick with thin custard would alleviate the monotony. Everything on the plates always had to be eaten - regardless of whether or not one liked it. On reflection this had to be so, for there were no snacks or other food available. Tea was simply bread and jam, or bread and fish paste, but Sundays included something extra: cheese and beetroot, known to us as 'school colours' - yellow and red.

Our final food of the day was a single round of bread spread with marmite. This came ready prepared on trays to the dormitories during the mid evening. Likewise, once a week we had our two ounce sweet ration, already bagged up on trays. We would line up in surname alphabetical order for the bags to be handed out. The order was reversed the following week so that if there was any choice the A's and B's did not always get first preference.

After breakfast, we boys would be assembled on the tennis courts and formed up in a large open square, military style, with Sergeant in the centre. He would then give us our daily instructions, before dismissing us for assembly in the school hall prior to the commencement of lessons. Some of the older children, those who had passed the equivalent of the eleven-plus examination, were bussed off to the Henley-on-Thames Grammar School.

During the evenings we were generally free to pursue our individual interests. In the winter these took place in the dormitories, which were also our indoor leisure areas. In the summer months we would be expected to be outside, usually involved in some sporting activity.

The radio, which was switched on in the early morning and late evening, gave us great pleasure, although there was no choice of programme. It led to a wide interest in sporting events. We all had our favourite football and cricket teams, and University Boat Race crew, that we fiercely supported and kept up to date with the current state of play. Mine, I know not why, were Chelsea, Kent and Cambridge respectively.

Most of us had hobbies: my principal one was stamp collecting, in which I have retained an interest all my life. In many ways it was a strange subject for there was little in the way of foreign mail during the war and certainly none coming our way. Nevertheless, some of us collected, buying from each other and selling the same stamps that were being continuously passed round the school. Our currency was predominantly our sweet rations. If sweets were not available, possessions were bartered after much haggling. From this hobby I developed a keen interest in geography: I learnt to locate distant and strange sounding countries on the world map, I knew their names in their own languages, their capital cities and even, in some cases, the approximate size of their populations. What a wonderful way to learn geography!

Weekends provided a break in the daily routine, generally for the better. However, at 6.00 am every other Saturday morning we were assembled in our respective dormitories for a visit by the two school nurses. Smartly dressed in starched white uniforms they would appear with a tall enamel jug filled with senna, a bitter laxative. We each were given a tot, then asked a question requiring an answer that ensured it was swallowed. Knowing the results of taking this purgative, it was the practice of a few lads to stick a finger down their own throats at the first opportunity to remove the senna before it could take effect. No doubt the intention to keep us regular was well meant, but one hundred and fifty boys served by just twelve toilets created a very unpleasant situation by midday!

Usually the rest of the day was ours to pursue our own activities. As we became older, we were allowed out of the school during the afternoons into the village and onto the nearby commons and into the woods. As time passed and preparations for the Normandy invasion got underway US troops encamped on parts of Peppard Common, and they became such a familiar sight that when I think of D Day, it is those fellows that come to mind, rather than our own soldiers.

Sunday mornings were taken up with a church service, as were Sunday evenings. The morning service was usually led by the headmaster, but once a month by a visiting priest. We preferred the latter: those sermons were strictly related to religious matters, whereas the Head's usually digressed to include matters of school discipline and current misdemeanours. Evensong was usually more enjoyable with four lustily sung hymns and no sermon.

The first Sunday in every month was visiting day, which was awaited with great expectation. The first parents would arrive shortly after the eleven o'clock service, some having come all the way from London in hired coaches, others by the No 7 Thames Valley bus service from Reading to Peppard. They would all be carrying small parcels and bags of goodies, not much, but all they could eke out of their rations as treats for us. Huddled groups of parents, mainly mums, and children would be seen all round the school until about 3.30 pm when they would all have to leave in time for us to have our tea at 4.00 and, then, to be back in London or wherever by early evening.

While we were living isolated lives in south Oxfordshire the war was still going on: we were not entirely immune to it. To start with, there were the US troops on the common. They eventually went, and I often wonder whether they were involved in the Utah or Omaha landings and if so, how many of them were killed and wounded. They were replaced later by a German prisoner of war camp set up nearby at Stoke Row, and in a field at Gallows Tree Common there was a huge search light to detect enemy aircraft. Most evenings we were aware of the bombing raids on Germany. Late evening we would hear, and sometimes see, wave after wave of allied planes en route to Germany and occupied Europe. The drone of heavily laden aircraft engines passing overhead would continue for an hour or so, and then all would be quiet. The following morning we would sometimes see returning aircraft, lone stragglers, damaged and limping home.

Bombs were dropped on Reading, severely damaging Wellsteads store in the centre of the town, and demolishing the People's Pantry, a restaurant, where several people were killed. Parts of Caversham were strafed by canon from a German aircraft, causing some damage but, fortunately, no casualties.

Christmas holidays were very different from those in Colton. In 1943 and 1944 they were spent at the school, as was the summer holiday of 1944. There was a relatively relaxed atmosphere and a large Christmas tree erected in the school hall, but I do not recall any decorations. The highlight was of course Christmas lunch (no mince that day), especially the pudding, with a sixpenny piece buried in every helping; and Christmas afternoon. During the run up to Christmas parcels posted to children were retained and stored by the school, unknown to us. On the day we would be assembled, all the boys and girls together, in the school hall and the parcels distributed. Occasionally, there was the sad situation of some children not having a parcel, usually due to the vagaries of the war time postal service, but the school to its credit made allowance for this and provided a supply of emergency gifts.

May 8th 1945, VE Day, saw the end of the war in Europe, which I remember hearing announced on the radio: it had been expected for several days with the Russian army already in Berlin and Hitler having committed suicide. For us at school, I remember little else about it, other than the initial euphoria, and the thought that we were possibly going to have more sweets, and better things to eat – as it turned out, a forlorn hope! More significantly for me were the official celebrations shortly after.

By that time mother had returned to live in Reading. She had taken lodgings in a large detached house in Oxford Road close to Tilehurst railway station and the River Thames, and was employed in the Reading branch of Jax Ladies' Outfitters, that had its headquarters in London. As manager, she was invited with one other to witness the VE parade through the streets of London, viewed from their upper windows that overlooked Oxford Street, along which the parade would pass. Somehow she managed to persuade the headmaster to allow me to accompany her.

That morning we travelled to a bomb scarred London that was decorated with flags and bunting, struggled through excited crowds, the like of which I had never seen before. We made our way along Oxford Street and eventually took our places at one of the windows. What followed was a school boy's dream. Dozens of military bands; hundreds, possibly thousands, of marching soldiers, sailors and airmen from most of the allied countries and the Empire; an array of uniforms, including kilts, turbans, and frilly skirted Greeks with bobbed shoes. All units were clapped as they passed and so loudly cheered that by the finish we were utterly exhausted. The rest of the day passed in a blur.

The war against Japan was still continuing in the Far East and the Pacific. This was fought by the so called forgotten army in Burma, and by the Americans; and being so distant, to some extent even more forgotten after VE Day. The Japanese were fighting tenaciously, and the war's end looked to be still some way off. Its arrival, for me, was surprising.

I was on summer holiday: my first away from Bishopswood. Mother, Primrose and I, were staying in bed and breakfast accommodation in Burnham on Sea in Somerset when we heard that an atom bomb had been dropped on the Japanese city of Hiroshima - a bomb so powerful that it had devastated the city, killing tens of thousands of people. Then three days later, on the 9th August, came the announcement of a second. This one, a plutonium bomb, dropped the previous day, obliterated another city, Nagasaki. Even to me, a boy just eleven years old, this was astounding news. On the 14th, the Japanese surrendered. The following day, the surrender was accepted, and the 15th August 1945 hence became known as VJ Day.

That, of course, also brought my war to a close: a war that began six years earlier on the Kent coast, and ended on another coast in Somerset.



August 1945 - Tony, Primrose and mum

POST WAR AND LATER YEARS

The end of the war did not bring about the anticipated immediate improvement in our food: that only came about gradually, as food rationing continued into the fifties. As late as 1953, when going on leave during my period of National Service, I recall that we were still being issued with ration documents.

At school, I remember an occasion of great excitement when a special consignment was delivered; a large food parcel from South Africa containing tins of jam and fruits, especially peaches. I recall, too, the first oranges and bananas, which we had along with school colours one Sunday tea time in 1946.

A few years after I left Bishopswood, the Royal Alexandra & Albert moved nearer to London, to Gatton Park in Surrey, and the majority of the buildings that had been my home were eventually razed to the ground and replaced by a sports and social club. I never had any further association with the school after I left.

Colton was a different story. My mother and Mrs Norman remained in contact, corresponding for many years, certainly into the late fifties by which time Mr and Mrs Norman had moved to Albion Street in Rugeley. On the other hand, mother and Mrs Meddings never met each other, and I am unaware of any post-evacuation contact between them.

For my part, I returned to Colton for the first time in August 1947: accompanied by Primrose, I spent a fortnight's holiday at Margaret Eva Cottage; and returned fleetingly in August 1951 on both the outward and return journeys of a cycling holiday to the Lake District. Some eighteen months or so later, during the winter of 1953 when stationed at RAF Hednesford, just a few miles south of Rugeley, I was invited to several enjoyable Sunday lunches in the warmth of the Albion Street home. I returned briefly to Albion Street in 1958 with my wife Valerie, who had expressed a wish to meet Mrs Norman. By then, Mr Norman had died.

My last visit to Colton was in 1982 when Valerie and I called in at Margaret Eva Cottage and introduced ourselves to the current resident, who kindly made us welcome and showed us around. We also took the opportunity for me to renew contact with Watty's wife, Joan; and June Myatt (that was) who were close neighbours, living in Heathway.

THE END



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