

Wartime West Sussex 1939 – 1945

EVACUEES

Remembering evacuee life in South Harting-1

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By Laura Barnard, South Harting

I remember when I first came to Harting as an evacuee, I was very aware of the darkness and quiet. I was used to the bustle and well-lit streets of London. In Harting there were very few houses with electricity and one had to use oil lamps and candles and no mains water supply. We arrived carrying a small haversack or suitcase which we were advised to make sure was light enough to carry ourselves.

At the start of the journey in London we were issued with a gas mask and marched in crocodile file to Waterloo Station. We had no idea of our destination but eventually arrived in Haslemere where we were transferred to coaches and taken to Harting. On arrival we were given rations for 48 hours and then lined up to be allocated our billets. This was very traumatic and I recall Mrs Andrews, who had been allocated my three brothers, my sister and me, arguing with the organisers that she couldn't take us. This made me very upset thinking she didn't want us when in fact the truth was that she knew she and her husband, the pastor, were moving from the village and we would have to be transferred. I wanted to go back to London but eventually we went off to the Manse with the pastor's wife and spent a very happy four weeks there.

After four weeks the Andrews were transferred to Burgess Hill and I was moved to Billingsgate Cottages where things were very different. There were no smart houses or Mews in those days, just a row of sheds and outhouses and five little cottages which all belonged to Mr Wild of Harting Stores.

I lived in the top cottage facing the road. It had two rooms up and two down with a staircase going up through the middle. There was no electricity, no bathroom or mains water and no inside toilet. In this small space lived the landlady with her two children and seven evacuees. At night, we children slept on a straw palliasse in a row in the downstairs room. We got water from an underground stream on the hill outside by turning a heavy iron wheel to draw up the water and carrying the filled buckets back to the house. This had to be done several times a day, often having to queue at the wheel as all the cottages shared the same facility. All drinking water had to be boiled which meant the old black stove had to be alight all the time.

Going to the toilet meant a walk of about 100 yards to the Elsan Bucket at the end of the row of gardens. I remember having to accompany my little sister when she was too afraid to go on her own in the evening. She was only four at the time and hated the pitch dark outside. I wasn't too keen either, having been used to indoor flush toilets at home. The Elsans were emptied once a week by a man with a horse and cart. We called him Dan the Lavender man as you could smell him approaching long before he arrived!

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With the new intake of children, the school was bursting at the seams. Consequently it was decided that we would attend for half days only and we evacuees alternated with the village children. When we attended school in the morning we would then spend the afternoon either in Shaxson Hall playing games or, if the weather was fine, we would go for nature walks. The next week we would attend school in the afternoons. After initial chaos, things settled down and we attended school normally. However, the classroom was very crowded with three classes in one. Harting Headmaster, Mr Rendell, taught the seniors, our teacher from London, Mr Greetham, taught the 9 to 11 year olds and Mr Archer taught the younger children – all in one room! If I regret anything about the war years it is that my education suffered. In London, I had been head girl in my primary school and prior to the move, I had just passed my eleven plus and was due to go to high school. Ever since, I have felt that I missed out.

My mother visited us once a week and bought us a gramophone and some records and roller skates. The first time me and my London friends went out skating we got into trouble from the locals. Our teacher told us to be more considerate to our hosts and offered us the playground for our skating. This wasn't so good, however, as the playground was full of potholes.

In the beginning, I didn't like Harting very much as I missed all the activities I enjoyed in London. I was used to visiting Hyde Park, St James's Park to see the Changing of the Guard, the Imperial War Museum, Petticoat Lane on Sundays. I belonged to the Girls' Life Brigade and we would walk behind the Boys' Brigade Band to Church at St Margaret's, Westminster on Sundays, home for lunch then off to Sunday School. There was also the excitement of seeing the Lord Mayor's Show and the Boat Race, of Pantomimes and Circuses, of parties at Guy's Hospital, South London Fire Brigade, and the Trocodero. Understandably life in Harting seemed extremely dull in contrast.

We went back to London for Christmas 1939 and stayed for six weeks. There was no bombing for several months and we wanted to stay longer but, much to our disappointment, Dad sent us back to Harting. However, in 1940, things changed dramatically for us as Mum was bombed out in October and came to live in Harting, and then Dad was lost at sea in December leaving Mum with six children to bring up. We all moved into the thatched cottage at the end of Tipper Lane and although life was very primitive we survived.

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