

Wartime West Sussex 1939 – 1945

EVACUEES

Remembering evacuee life in West Wittering-2

From the *West Wittering Women's Institute Village Scrapbook*.

By Pamela Harris

FLASHBACK ON EVACUATION. 1939-1943.

by Pamela Harris, former pupil of Ensham
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Eight years ago, hundreds of parties of school-children made their exodus from that great, and obvious target for German bombers, London. One party had as its destination West Wittering, Sussex. I was eleven years old at the time, and one of that travel-bedraggled party, and all I knew was, that I was being evacuated. It seemed a funny word to me, and I had only a vague idea of what it meant, but everyone else seemed to know, and as they were carrying on in a very business-like manner, I did not bother to enquire further. My mother had said that I would be going for a short holiday to the country and that was good enough for me. My 'short holiday' lasted precisely four years.

How well I remember coming out of Chichester's little railway station and piling into the fresh green and cream 'buses that awaited us. One was especially popular because it was an open air 'bus and though somewhat antiquated in design, it was ideally suited to the strong sunshine which streamed down upon us. The fact that it started to rain on the journey to Wittering was of no consequence.

The 'bus ride seemed endless to me but at last we came to the Council Houses where some cheery folk were standing in their gardens waving to us as we went by. The 'buses came to a standstill outside the Memorial Hall, and once inside, complete with haversacks and gas masks, we were given lemonade, biscuits and comics to amuse us.

On the platform were seated what seemed to me a formidable array of people and I assumed that they were the 'powers that be' of the village. In reality, they were such people as the vicar, his wife, the billeting officer, the school teacher and others whose faces I cannot remember. The whole thing was well organised, and soon after we were taken to our various billets (armed with a package of iron rations,) and thus we became installed in West Wittering.

Those early weeks were crammed with new happenings, new experiences, and of course homesickness. The first momentous event was the declaration of war, shortly after 11 a.m. on Sept. 1st. 1939. I remember it so distinctly. We were all in church, smartly attired in our nice green uniforms, seated in those side pens, (enough room for two,) of the church which are generally avoided by the regular and therefore wiser congregation. I have no recollection of the beginning of the service, for by that time was naturally taken in examining the number of interesting things, especially the St. George's stained glass window which could be seen from my corner of the church.

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It was, however, whilst the vicar was reading the first lesson that a figure appeared in the open doorway, hesitated, then entered the church, and with tiptoed tread walked straight up to the vicar and whispered in his ear. It intrigued me, but little did I suspect the news that the messenger carried. The vicar paused, straightened his surplice, and then announced that war had been declared against Germany. Dead silence: even the birds had ceased their singing. "Hymn No. 165. O God, our help in ages past."...

Quite frankly, I had expected an immediate bombardment of Britain to take place, and German soldiers with leering faces to appear from everywhere. Life, strangely enough, went on as usual, and we evacuees had a lovely time. The summer was at its best, the sea was three minutes walk away, and no school! We made the most of it. After the first fortnight, however, school opened at the Memorial Hall. I couldn't help thinking of the significance of this. Here were we, evacuated from our homes because of the outbreak of a war, receiving our education in a building built as a dedication to those who had lost their lives in the first world war.

I think the less said about lessons under those conditions the better. They were not really very good. Lessons were adapted to conditions and environment. We had Nature rambles, swimming lessons in the sea: we learned all about the rotation of crops and the history of West Wittering: and we learned from experience that a green apple on the tree is better than two in the stomach. The small meadow at the back of the hall was given to us for allotments, and what a successful enterprise that was. We had competitions for the best produce and everyone was really keen.

Our parties were good fun, too, and we had a Wednesday evening club. Numbers fluctuated considerably. When everything seemed quiet, children went back to London. The Battle of Britain which was fought so gallantly over the Channel and south coast seemed to give weight to their argument that it was safer in London than in Wittering. It certainly seemed that way with bombs dropping, (in the mud, thank goodness!) mines floating neatly down in green silk parachutes, (in fields, for the most part,) Jerry planes crashing and exciting dog-fights overhead when our Spitfires and Hurricanes would take on a fight at the odds of ten to one. How little we realized how much we owed to so few!

By this time the beaches had been closed and effectively mined. So the Harbour, (which we had completely to ourselves,) became our happy hunting ground. Of course, officially, no boats were allowed on the water, but here we could bathe if we so desired. Our parents visited us as often as they could, and sometimes some would go home for a while and then return. During the first two years, I went home only once. In 1941, I went to a different school in Chichester and the rest of the Memorial Hall School used a building in Chichester, so for us, the Memorial Hall School was no more.

Shortly the originals returned to London, till I was the only one left. Then in 1943, my school returned to London and I had to go with it.

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By this time, I had grown to love Wittering dearly and the thought of living in a town was distasteful, to say the least. Evacuation had taught me many things, given me a wider scope, and had established new contacts and I was loath to part from them. I had changed from child to adolescent, a very important period in anyone's life, and my ideas had been moulded, changed to suit my environment. With a return to London, picking up severed friendships, readjusting myself when I was in a less malleable state, I knew I should find difficulties. It was like being evacuated to one's own home.

Having completed that readjustment, I look back upon the experience of evacuation as one which was invaluable, and when I think of the luck by which I was dispatched to Wittering, I marvel. Thank you, Wittering, and the people of Wittering who did such a fine piece of work in harbouring the evacuees from London.

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