

Wartime West Sussex 1939 - 1945 ON THE HOME FRONT - DAILY LIFE

Remembering wartime at East Grinstead County Grammar School

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The School in War Time - by a Pupil, by Gwen Broad

We returned late for the September term of 1939 because of the disorganisation of evacuation, and found a number of new members in our form who were staying with friends and relatives in unofficial evacuation from London. They brought quite a new element, and we envied them their freedom from parental supervision although they often had irksome conditions to live in. One remembers the overcrowded conditions in school with so many classrooms used by Clapham College, our evacuee school, and the unfamiliar sight of Xaverian Brethren in staff room and corridors. I was intrigued once when I was having a study period at the back of a Chemistry lab to hear the originality and ingenuity of homework excuses from Clapham boys. "My lady was using the sewing machine on the other end of the table, Brer., so I couldn't write properly".

Soon boys, and girls too, who had recently left school, returned to visit us looking very impressive in smart uniforms; and it was a great excitement when any member of staff came back so accoutred. Unfortunately, it was not long, either, before we began to have news of casualties among them.

The ATC was very active and also the Red Cross department. We assiduously attended training classes and sat examinations, and took periods of duty at Queen Victoria Hospital, but I seem to think that much of our efforts went into collecting money. There was the 1d a week fund, and innumerable concerts and competitions, and one or two rather successful dances. I was very proud to be part of a Red Cross Youth Detachment review held on Buckingham Palace lawns and inspected by the Queen. There was a review by the King of the Home Guard in Hyde Park on the same Sunday afternoon and our South-East detachment nearly marched head on into a Home Guard column near the Mall, as manoeuvring evolutions were not our strong point.

During weeks when most nights saw Air Raid activity everyone vied with everyone else next morning to have the best bomb story, and to produce the best piece of shrapnel or bullet case. Raids during the daytime meant long sessions in the shelters when boredom was relieved by singing or games, and sometimes lessons went on in most unpromising conditions. On one occasion, when the All Clear went, we emerged to find columns of smoke billowing up from a wrecked German plane shot down just over the hedge at the bottom of the field. Ashes were falling on the shelter steps as we came up. On another occasion, we had a raid in the middle of a Higher Certificate examination, and we had to be sworn to silence for the next couple of hours in the shelter; afterwards we went back to finish the paper, knowing that there had been a raid on the town, and I believe a report went to the Examining Board explaining that there had been extenuating circumstances.

School in wartime seemed a bit unreal and irrelevant because what seemed then to be the important things were happening elsewhere. We were sometimes afraid, but it was the irksomeness and monotony of restrictions made necessary by wartime which required more fortitude. Life was mostly very unglamorous.

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