

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

Remembering wartime at East Grinstead Primary School ¹

From *Chequer Mead, History of a Local School 1859-1990*, by E Shepherd and M Seabrook c1990

By Miss S Brons

During the war, school milk was 2½d a week, with free milk for needy children. The milk was delivered in pint bottles, and the teacher poured this into the child's own mug.....Children brought "lunch" to eat at milk times, and when a consignment of oranges came into the country, children and pregnant women were allowed the ration. Oh the agony of being asked, "Please Miss Brons, will you peel my orange?" The smell of the orange, the temptation to lick my fingers was a torment, for I hadn't tasted an orange for years.

Gas masks had to be carried, and gas mask drills were hated by children and teachers alike. Everyone looked so grotesque in the black masks, perhaps even more so in the Mickey Mouse variety, made especially for children. Fortunately, in a short time the gas threat faded, and gas mask cases were converted into school satchels.

Air raid practice was fun for the children, for we could not work down the air raid shelters, which for the infants were underground alongside the boundary with De La Warr road. I seem to remember that we had a dim light down there, and we sat in the gloom singing and telling stories until the all clear was sounded. We emerged, checked that we had a full complement of children, and resumed work...

When the V1 bombs came, it was more dangerous to go to one of the shelters, than to stay in the school. The guns had been moved in nearer to the school, and falling shrapnel would have put the children at risk. When the siren went, the children just dived under their desks, and they stayed there until it was over. I cannot remember any child crying or showing fear at these times. Perhaps they accepted it as part of the school routine.

Sadly, we lost children from the junior school when the Whitehall was hit by stray bombs. Some children had gone to the cinema on that Friday after school, partly because it was raining, but mainly because their mothers were working in a small munitions factory at the top of Rice's Hill. These children were among the casualties, and following their funeral the infants seemed to do nothing but draw and make coffins in plasticine. This distressed me, but Miss Jefford, very sensibly, said to me, "My dear, just let them go on doing it; they need to work it out of their system."

Some of our children were evacuated to Wales when the V1s and V2s started to come. Miss Errey went with them, and those who stayed a considerable period returned at last to East Grinstead with no signs of their old Sussex accents, but with the singing intonation from the valleys of South Wales.

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¹ later called Chequer Mead