

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

## Remembering wartime in and around East Grinstead

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by Mrs Eileen Jeffery

We came home that hot late August afternoon in 1939 from school to find our mother had been shopping to buy a suitcase to put our belongings in for our trip to the country. We were the writer, Eileen, 9 years, John 7, Molly 6 and Peter just turned 4. Our father saw us off on the train to East Grinstead with our cardboard gas mask boxes over our shoulders and passed us a whole bar of chocolate (Nestle's) each from the machine on the platform. I knew that something was afoot because he never bought us sweets. Then he kissed our mother goodbye.

After arriving in pitch darkness at East Grinstead we all bundled into a taxi (there being no buses running) and duly arrived at the front door of Shovelstrode Manor which was to be our home for the next seven years. It was the home of our present Queen Mother's eldest brother Lord Glamis as he then was (later Lord Strathmore and moved to Glamis Castle in Scotland).

The butler opened the door to us: a poor bewildered mother, four children and one suitcase. My father always said that incident changed me and gave me ideas above my station. All I remember is that we used to say to the other evacuees from the East End that we were 'private evacuees', different from them, which always started a fight. We came to be at the manor because our mother's sister was lady's maid to Lady Glamis and on the question of evacuees it was decided to have someone they knew. The cook and butler lived at the lodge so had their own nieces stay with them. Four days after our arrival war was declared, so we were to stay there for the duration.....

It was the staff that put us in our place, not the family. I think our mother had quite a worry trying to keep us quiet. We ate with the staff at a very long table headed by the very strict butler. Eventually mum had three rooms upstairs and looked after us herself, cooking in the housemaids' cupboard. We wanted to explore everywhere and everything. The chauffeur and his family definitely didn't take to us and never changed their views, just because we climbed the fruit trees and ate the apples and tasted our first blackberries picked from the very large gardens...

Our old dad visited us now and again. He was a firewatcher in London and used to get up at the crack of dawn on a Monday to walk four miles to catch his coach to London and would meet several more fathers on the way doing the same thing. Mum always said she couldn't do a thing with us after a visit from him.

School was next, a lovely little village school in Hammerwood about two miles away....The school had quite a few evacuees that were billeted on the surrounding cottages in the hamlet. Some, like the large family of Joe Connelly, stayed in Sussex for good, the others gradually trickled back home, but when we first started school we brought the number of pupils up to the grand total of 48.....

The army was billeted in all the big houses in Hammerwood. We had a delayed time bomb along the bridle path. A German plane, a Junkers 88, was

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shot down and the airman parachuted across our small playground. We all ran to see him land, with the headmistress screaming at us to come back. The locals took off across the fields with shotguns and pitchforks and caught him in a tree where he was stuck. Our nature walks took us to view the dangling parachute.

The local farm of Mr and Mrs Verity had a pet sheep that roamed round the house and six cats that sat on everything in the kitchen. We took our broken china to them to make grit for the hens as there was a shortage of it. We were told off at school for 'helping Hitler' by sliding down the haystacks so that the rain sank through the thatching and ruined the hay. We would jump on the cows' backs while they were chewing the cud and this upset the milk yield. Mind you, the local children put us up to it. We Londoners were blamed for lots of things. Poor old mum was always bailing us out from all sorts of pranks.

Mum became the school cook in a big wooden hut cooking on a three-burner paraffin stove with a tin box on top for an oven and of course a pump for all the water needed. I can remember the banana and custard with desiccated coconut (before food rationing started) and oatcakes. She would save a few for us to eat on the way home in the freezing cold. She also cleaned the school and did a bit in the schoolhouse as well as having two more babies, Michael and Valerie. She called them her war effort.

Sticky paper was stuck on the windows for the duration to save the glass from shattering during the air raids. Yes, we did have them, as we were in a direct line from the south coast. We watched the dogfights during the Battle of Britain and saw two Spitfires shoot a doodlebug down. The blast knocked me across the room. I was standing at an open window at the time. East Grinstead itself was bombed and fired on one Friday teatime. Several of our school friends died and we all took flowers to school for the funerals.

During any air raid we sheltered in Mrs. Hardman's kitchen under her table. We hated going down into the shelters at East Grinstead senior school, they were so dark and damp. We had our own shelter at the manor, the wine cellar. We only used it about twice. I don't think the butler trusted anyone with the bottles stashed down there. There was an escape hatch leading up to the driveway.....

We all had our own little garden plots. We loved playing in the thick mud in the woods, it was bright yellow. Mum said she didn't mind the London dirt and grime but she never came to terms with the mud...

We kept rabbits but the weasels killed them so mother kept bantam hens. They would fly on top of the high kitchen cupboard and lay eggs that would roll off. Before this the cook and butler kept chickens for the eggs. I remember that revolting smell of potato peelings cooking at night because chicken food was rationed like most things. Being a big family, our food ration came in a big lump once a week or month. Mum was able to make it go much further as she was an excellent cook. You should have tasted her carrot marmalade! I took our ration books to Coatmans the grocer, in East Grinstead, where we were registered, likewise Curtis the baker, whose bread was sour in the summer months. Sainsburys had moved into a small church after being bombed. There was no wrapping paper for anything, you took your own. The two youngest children had green baby books and I would queue up for the odd banana or orange. I thought the dried egg was lovely.

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Mum couldn't afford new clothes so she would swap our clothing coupons for second hand things. We wore knitted pixie hoods and ankle socks made from unravelled garments to keep us warm in those long deep snowy winters. On the long walk to church every other Sunday four of us wore the same grey coat and hat as we grew into it, just altering the buttons...

Back at Hammerwood School we would collect acorns for the pigs and rose hips to help the war effort. Collecting waste paper, books, etc. would get us a free ticket to the pictures, a very rare treat...

The army camped in our woods. The Canadians were great with us children. We would help them with their spud bashing and they told us great tales of Indian Attacks! They took us to a summer fete in their lorry, with mum's permission of course. We couldn't believe the loaded tables of food we saw. We had to be told to help ourselves. It was the first time we tasted potato salad. They also taught us to play baseball.

Mum eventually became cook at the manor as all the staff had been called up for war service. I had to scrub stone floors on my knees every morning before school and often missed the boneshaker bus so had to walk the four miles to the senior school in the town. Newspapers and parcels were collected from the local bus down a very long lane and if you missed it you waited for it to come back into town again. The bus had wooden slat seats and came three times a day. There was no bus on Sunday. I can still see the poor burnt airmen from the Queen Victoria Hospital get on our bus. A woman remarked how disgusting it was to allow them out. I thought how very brave they were to face the outside world with all the skin burnt off their faces and their shrivelled-up hands that couldn't hold anything...

We would push our baby's big bassinet pram through the woods to collect wood chips and woodsmen had left or anything that would burn, then carry it up four flights of very long stairs for our mum. We collected horse manure from the gypsies in our homemade go-carts for the garden. We used to free any rabbit we found caught in the snares as we thought it so cruel. (Our mother loved rabbit to eat until she was given her first one to skin and gut. It put her off rabbit for life.)...

The Queen visited her brother for lunch in 1946 and mum cooked her lunch, pigeon and then sherry trifle. Our mum also gave a lovely V.E. party for all the local children. On the day we went down ill and had to go to bed. Later the grown-ups had their party and danced to the old wind-up gramophone records.

In our later years Mum found two houses to rent in East Grinstead but father wouldn't let her settle there. Young Valerie aged three cried bitterly to be taken back 'home' to settle down in a dingy third floor council flat. John and I didn't return to London. I joined the Women's Land Army.

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