

Reminiscences of an eight year old boy and his Evacuation to Kingswear, Devon.

How my evacuation came about. I lived with my mother and brother, Charley, my father having died early in 1944, at Harvard Road, Hither Green, Lewisham in south London. We were bombed out of Harvard Road during the early part of the war, probably at some stage in the Blitz.

My story nearly came to an end there and then, when a landmine fell about six houses up the road from us. The bomb must have been dropped during the night because I remember that when we emerged from the Anderson shelter in the back garden, much of the back of the house was missing, with progressively more damage towards where the bomb had fallen. I think the house was patched up as best could be, but eventually we were re-housed at Brockley, still in Lewisham. We stayed there for a while and were eventually re-housed at Bellingham, Lewisham. It was here that we endured the continuation of the bombing both while at home and at school, with my mother's daily warning not to pick up what we found in the street on our way to school. Shrapnel was highly prized by all of the boys and was often still hot to touch from the air raid the night before.

My mother must have had very strong nerves because there was never any talk of Charley and me being evacuated, even when V1 bombs, "Doodle Bugs" started to arrive in 1944. Later on, however, a V2 bomb "the silent killer," fell on shops at New Cross, south London, killing many daytime shoppers. This was the final straw for my mother and we were soon evacuated.

The journey started in a playground at a school in Plassy Road, Catford. After last minute farewells we boarded double-decker busses that took us to Paddington railway station. Whether we stopped on en-route or not I don't remember, however, I do recall the floor of the compartment getting a bit wet as the journey progressed. I can clearly remember the carriage window being wound down by the thick leather strap, and pocket handkerchiefs being held out of the window to catch the slipstream of the train. Inevitably several hankies were lost.

We eventually arrived at Newton Abbot Station, and subsequently put on to coaches. Our coach eventually arrived at Kingswear and we were marshalled into the village hall and stood in a row for people to select whom they were prepared to accommodate. Apparently, girls were preferred over boys as "Boys were trouble". Eventually Charley and I were picked. I think that one of the problems was that Charley being 12 years old, had been told by our mother that we were not to be parted. It may also have been written on the cardboard labels tied to the lapels of our jackets.

Our first accommodation in Kingswear was in a row of terraced cottages accessed from the main road via a very very long flight of steps. There were two rows of cottages, one being built higher up the hill. However, to this day I cannot remember which of the two rows we stayed at, but I do remember those stairs. Another strong memory is that of a dreadful feeling of home sickness.

The time of our arrival in Kingswear is etched in my memory, not in days or months, but in the very strong smell given off from the then popular shrub called privet. The somewhat sickly smell is etched in my memory, and for many years after instantly reminded me of that awful home sickness.

For some reason we did not stay very long at these cottages, I don't know what the reason was why we did not stay, but I clearly remember being collected by the village constable. I also clearly remember that warm summers evening when the constable walked us down past the creek to what I now know as Waterhead Cottages. The memory is virtually crystal clear of me sitting on the curb stone at the back of the large green painted sheds while Charley and the constable went to talk to a lady who turned out to be Mrs Isaacs at number 3. It was Mrs Isaacs who took us in and made Charley and me very welcome. Mr & Mrs Isaacs already had a son, John, and although I don't remember much about the sleeping arrangements, the cottage was quite small but we fitted in very well.

I think our arrival in Kingswear must have been late June or early July 1944. The D day landings had taken place on 6 of June 1944 and there would have been a tremendous amount of activity in Kingswear and Dartmouth and I feel sure at least some of this would have stayed in my memory had I witnessed this.

I clearly recall there being much confusion about the lack of room at the village school, and quite probably, it being close to the school summer holidays, I never went to school until the September intake. Charley being 12 went over to Dartmouth via the ferry without delay.

During that summer of 1944, with no school to attend, the days must have seemed endless, with so many things to do and places to explore. I suppose that the evacuees in Kingswear would have congregated together, and although I don't recall all of our stay, there are a few events I remember quite clearly.

One of the favourite haunts of the evacuee boys was what I believe is called Lighthouse Beach accessed by a very long flight of steps from the lower road that leads out from Kingswear towards the mouth of the river. There is still a navigational light as there was in 1944. One of our favourite pastimes was to look along the shore line for what were known as K Rations. These consisted of light brown cardboard boxes about the size of a small chocolate box, and coated in a thick water proof wax. The ideal find would be a box where the corners had not been broken by the action of the waves on the shore and sea water had not got inside. On this particular day a box was found, but unfortunately sea water had got in.

The content of the boxes was always the same, a small tin of instant coffee, biscuits and chocolate, these never lasted long, and on this particular find a packet of very wet and soggy Woodbine cigarettes. Having scoffed the biscuits and chocolate we set about drying the Woodbines out on the rocks. Eventually we were successful in this drying process and we then divided the cigarettes up by cutting them in half so there was enough to go round. I very clearly remember it being my turn to "light up", and having taken a draft of smoke went, I was told, a distinct colour of green and was very sick. My first and last introduction to smoking, and I have never touched another cigarette since!

The railway station and shunting yard was always a place of great interest to us. One of the most exciting events was to help the engine driver and fireman to turn the steam engine round on the turn table in what is now the car park. The currant wall along the Kingswear road that looks down on to the station is not the one that was there in 1944. The wall then had a capping consisting of stones stood on edge, and were very uncomfortable to lean on. This discomfort did not deter Charley and me when feeling a bit home sick to look down on to the station to try and work out which trains left for Paddington and those, I think, for Birmingham. All with a view to boarding the train to go home. Details about getting on to

the station platform, or indeed the train, never seemed to be a matter of concern to us. But of course we never did find the courage to carry out the plan.

Another favourite pastime on an incoming tide was to gather flat pieces of rock and stand on the railway bridge at the mouth of the creek and try to catch fish by dropping the rocks as the fish swam into the creek. We would check at low tide to see if we had been successful, but of course we never were, but not for the want of trying. Details about steam engines and carriages trundling along over the bridge and just behind us never seemed to be a matter of concern in our minds.

Another activity near by the bridge was to cross over the railway line to visit the "Torpedo Shed". As best as I can remember it was possible to see into the shed and watch, we imagined, the torpedoes being armed. The shed there now although newish still stands on the site of the one we knew.

A good time wasting exercise was to sit on the passenger ferry pontoon and try to catch fish with the aid of a hook, line and sinker, again with out success. It was, one day while sitting on the pontoon fishing with my feet hanging over the edge that one of my shoes fell off and straight into the water, never to be seen again. The walk back to Mrs Isaacs seemed a lot longer with only one shoe. I recall there was much letter writing by my mother about the loss of the shoe and the fact that ration coupons were needed to buy new shoes.

During the summer of 1944, the Royal Navy placed large sealed steel tanks in the creek. All of these were tied to one another and moored. We soon worked out how to pull the tanks in so that we could board them. It was great fun to run across the tanks, but as there were gaps between each one, they soon started to rock about with our running and jumping from tank to tank. The subsequent banging of the tanks against each other soon brought our fun to the attention of grown ups and we were told in no uncertain terms to get off.

Another memorable event coming out of school on my way back to Waterhead Cottages, my usual route was to come out of school, turn left, and very soon turn right into what I now believe to be Brixham Road. On this occasion and still not quite on the level part of the road, I found a £1 note on the ground. There was no one about so I took the money back to Mrs Isaacs; she explained that I could not keep the money and that we had to hand it in to the village constable. He explained that if the money was not claimed within three months it would be mine to keep. The money was never claimed and in due course it was returned to us. I don't recall what we did with the money; but for sweets you needed ration coupons.

There used to be a commercial laundry just up the road from Waterhead Cottages. One Sunday, it must have been a Sunday because everyone was at home including Mr Isaacs; the laundry had a very serious flood. As a result the water started to wash much of the coal stocks out down the road past the cottages. So off came the socks and shoes of the local boys and we paddled out into the water to collect as much coal as possible, with Mrs Isaacs telling us we could not keep it, but I think some would have found its way on to local fires. Eventually, someone from the laundry arrived and put a stop to any more coal collecting. Because the flood water was so great the fact of the matter was, of course, that most of the coal would have been washed into the creek.

One last memory, and again it must have been a weekend and possibly a Saturday, although I don't know why this seems to be the case. As we played by the creek we heard a vehicle

travelling at high speed along the road from the village and in what I now know to be a low gear. The vehicle, which I seem to remember, was a small van travelling so fast that it failed to negotiate the bend just before the first cottage and made a terrific noise as it ploughed into the front wall of the large house situated at the village end of the cottages. Two service men, I think, climbed out of the wrecked van and ran off up the road in the direction of Brixham, leaving someone to turn off the still revving engine. Apparently the two occupants had got drunk in the village and decided to go AWOL.

Christmas 1944 was on the horizon and no doubt our mother wanted us home by then. I don't remember the exact date of our departure but it must have been late November or early December. It was certainly a little later after we went collecting chestnuts with John in the nearby woods. My last memory of Kingswear was standing on the station platform with great excitement of going home, but excitement tinged with regret of saying goodbye to Mrs Isaacs and family.

My work has taken me and my wife, and in the early years our children, overseas to several countries with about ten years in Manila, Washington DC and Moscow. Throughout these years and almost every year since when we lived at home we have had a week or so in Devon, mainly staying in Dartmouth, but always visiting Kingswear. Happy Days.

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