

ALAN SIMMONDS WW2 and EVACUATION MEMORIES

I was born in May 1934 and I am now 81 years old. My brother Geoffrey was born in January 1933



We lived with our parents in Dulwich, South London and we both attended Dulwich Village Infants School until war was declared. What a challenging experience in a 5-6 year old child's life!

My Mother suffered permanently from chronic asthma and bronchitis and my Father, who had served in the Royal Artillery during the First World War and too old for the army, joined the Civil Defence Force and served one-day-on, one-day-off, in the National Fire Service.

Until recently I thought the whole school was evacuated to Sussex but I now know that some of the older children went with their teachers to the Leatherhead and Dorking areas of Surrey and I am trying to research if there were other destinations but finding no archive material is available.

Fearing that London would be bombed and even gassed, arrangements were made to evacuate the schools. We were each issued with a label on which our parents wrote our name and a square brown cardboard box on a string containing a gas mask, to hang over the shoulder. One morning, we left our school in a long crocodile two by two, label around the neck, gas mask over one shoulder and a packet of sandwiches for the journey. I think we said our goodbyes to our families either before we left home or in the school playground. The Head Mistress led the way holding aloft a large Union Jack flag.

We walked to North Dulwich Railway Station where we waited for a train to take us on the start of our journey. My brother remembered that many of the children, including himself, ate their sandwiches there and then, before we had even started. I don't recall the route and not knowing where we were going, we eventually arrived at Pulborough Railway Station in West Sussex. It was a grey, cold and drizzly afternoon; single deck motor coaches were waiting for us and they then ground their way to Thakeham village in Sussex, depositing us at the village church. I remember a great melee of children and village people, with our teachers ordering us to stand here, stand there, etc. I did not realise it was like a cattle market.

Lady Little arrived and it was obvious she was a very important person by the way the local people deferred to her and she then looked over the crowd of children. Eventually, and to my total surprise she pointed to my brother Geoffrey and me. She had selected us to go to live at 'Martins', the 'big house' of the village. The other children were all dispersed among the local families and we next met when attending Thakeham village school.

'Martins' was owned by the eminent Admiral Sir Charles Little, Second Sea Lord at the Admiralty. He was not often there; we seldom saw Lady Little or her young daughter either, having been ordered to keep away from the Little family's part of the house and we were looked after by the domestic staff. When we first arrived there must have been at least 10 or 12 staff including 2 gardeners, one

of whom was also a part-time policeman. We were given into the care of the boot-boy, Robert, who himself could only have been about 16 years old and we shared his room. I recall his burning ambition was to join the Royal Navy and he was forever drawing battleships.

We attended the village school, walking down the lane and back each day. Geoffrey went into the main school but my year was installed in the Parish Hall next to the playground. The main school was separate and had its own entry; our hall had a steep flight of steps up from the road which seemed mountainous to me. Each afternoon after lunch we rolled out mats and slept for about an hour.

Miss Skinner was the headmistress and for some reason, I was always nervous and frightened of her. Fortunately, being in the hall I was mainly away from her jurisdiction. The local children and the evacuees as I recall, did not seem to intermix much. My brother said that the school provided a lunch but I only remember eating sandwiches there. Sometimes, lunchtime sandwiches were exchanged. I have no idea now what I had but I clearly remember one or two local children bringing sauce sandwiches and one boy who often brought and sucked on a beef cube. I tried both the sauce sandwiches and a lick on the beef cube – but only once!

On one occasion after school had finished, I was dared to climb the long flight of steep steps from the lane up to the White Hart pub which was almost opposite the school. Those steps seemed to climb to the sky and when I managed to reach the top, I was immediately ordered to go away! One Sunday, a very important luncheon was held at 'Martins'. Long trestle tables were lined up on the drive and covered with sparkling white table cloths. The staff had been busy preparing the meal for days beforehand and I remember that King George VI sent venison for the main course, which he himself had shot, I suppose while hunting deer in Scotland. I recall being told that Sir Winston Churchill himself was expected to come but in the event, he did not. The VIPs duly arrived in large, chauffeured cars; they must have been important government and military figures; The American Ambassador Joseph Kennedy did attend (father of the late American President John F Kennedy). Geoffrey and I had been warned not to appear but after the lunch Lady Little sent for us and we were paraded around the tables. We were questioned but I have no recall of what I was asked or replied.

Apparently, so I have been told, I was a 'chatterbox' and often began my sentences with "Ere, listen" and many years later my father said that Lady Little told him that everyone at 'Martins' thought the expression rather funny but she was shocked when hearing herself use it at that important lunch. On one occasion Sir Charles, an imposing figure who I really hardly knew, caught me at the main front door looking at his newspaper, which was always ironed before being sent to his study. He asked me "Can you read that"? I was really only looking at the pictures on the front page but I was quite good at reading for my age, so answered bravely, "Yes, Sir". To my dismay he took me into his study and asked me to read it to him. The front page was filled with war reports but I must have managed somehow because he was quite impressed and sent me out, saying "My goodness, you have surprised me". Having been lectured by the staff to keep away from the admiral and his family, not to bother them, not to be a nuisance or disturb them in any way, I was quite frightened of him but he was in fact, friendly and put me at my ease.

Late one Sunday afternoon when my father visited, the admiral was dressed in quite scruffy clothes and pushing a wheelbarrow, having collected fallen apples in the orchard. He cheerfully asked my father if he would like some to which my father replied "yes please, mate". The admiral then piled a heap of apples on the back seat of the car and ambled off with the 'barrow. I then told my Dad, "he's the admiral" to which he replied "I thought he was the gardener".



Time passed fairly uneventfully. One lunch time, a huge barrage balloon which had broken away passed quite low over the school, trailing its wire hawser cable behind it. It scraped over the school roof and we all ran to grab the hawser, with teachers frantically shouting at us not to touch it. Fortunately, it went on its way without some poor kid hanging on.

In class, we were always being lectured not to waste paper or drop our pencils etc., as sailors gave their lives to bring these materials to us. We learned to knit and produced squares of knitted wool which were taken away to be made into blankets for the sailors – so we were told.

The vicar put on a couple of 'magic lantern' slide shows and I was fascinated, watching him set up the big mahogany and brass projector and sorting the glass picture slides but I have no recall of the subject matter. We also got invited to the church or perhaps it was Church House for tea and sandwiches but I assume this was not just for us evacuees but for all village children.

One of the gardeners at 'Martins' used to set snares for rabbits around the estate. He was very country-wise and identified different trees, plants, birds and wild animals for us, so for a 'city boy' he was very interesting to be with. On one occasion he pointed out a red squirrel – are they still in the area? We occasionally went out with him at the end of the afternoon to set the snares. I did not enjoy going out with him early in the morning to get the trapped rabbits, which had probably been struggling for hours. He quickly despatched them and they were skinned and cleaned for the kitchen. His unpleasant trick after killing a rabbit, which he played on each of us at different times, was to squeeze its bladder so that it squirted urine over us. My brother said that on one occasion after a rabbit had been cleaned, the entrails were draped around his neck so he avoided the gardener after that experience – I never suffered that horror.

In summer, the village fete was held in the grounds of 'Martins'. This was a big event. We have a photo of my brother and me in white sailor suits; why I don't know but they must have been from our parents. Ships' names were on the hat bands, HMS Hood and HMS Renown - these had to be removed later in the war after both ships had been tragically sunk with a huge loss of life. We helped with the harvest and the farm workers all seemed quite ancient to me, I suppose because most of the younger men were away in the armed forces. Hardly any mechanisation; I only recall one tractor and the harvester. And a few men in a line, swinging scythes, with just a threshing machine and horses and carts for transport.

From the school we were once all marched up the hill behind the church and given buckets to collect acorns, I think for pig-feed. It was miserably cold and wet and I still remember the pain afterwards from the blood getting back into my fingers and toes.

Once when our father visited he took us in his little Ford up that hill to take us to see where a German bomber had come down in a field. It must have exploded when it crashed as there was just a deep crater and pieces of metal over the field. The site was guarded by a policeman who, when he saw us, shouted for us to "clear off". Another time, a grey German bomber had crashed in a field north of Thakeham. It was fairly intact but badly burnt. Some of the children managed to get small items off the bomber before some soldiers appeared and again the cry went up, "clear off". This 'plane had such an awful acrid smell from being burned that I did not go too near it.

During all of this time there were troops stationed in the locality. Sometimes, a little armoured scout car was parked at the fork in the road just by the entrance to 'Martins'. I tried to talk to the two soldiers once but they told me to go away. Probably due to boredom, they said they did not know if I was a German spy but they would not let me explain who I was and being so young I thought they were being serious. There were always stories being passed around and I have no way of knowing

what was rumour and what was true. I remember hearing that some German airmen had been seen one night baling out of a doomed bomber and a local Storrington doctor had taken his shotgun and together with a few men - Home Guard I suppose, had gone out to find them. He was shocked to find boys of 17 and 18, frightened and crying and expecting to be shot on capture.

At Martins, I think the staff must have got tired of having to look after us. We were eventually put in the grooms' quarters over the stables, which obviously had not been used for a very long time and the conditions were unpleasant to say the least. We ate and bathed in the big house in the staff quarters as before. My brother developed impetigo and some other problem which necessitated him having his head shaved.

My father only managed an occasional visit as he did not have the time or the petrol, which was strictly rationed. He found we were still wearing the same shoes we had been sent away with although we had both grown and must have been shocked on seeing our living quarters. All I know is that we were removed at quite short notice.

We were taken in by a London family, Mr & Mrs Favour who had a little daughter called Kay. They had a small house, (17, Crescent Rise). We weren't there long but I remember several times standing outside in the road after walking home from school in the afternoon and watching dog fights high in the sky immediately above with fighters swooping, turning and leaving criss-crossing vapour trails. We could clearly hear the rattle of their gunfire.

When our mother was well enough to come to Thakeham to join us, a house was rented at the very end of a cul-de-sac, (49, Furze Common Road). It had no plumbing or electricity. The house and garden were bordered by a stone wall and on the other side was a large field. The rough wall was home to small lizards, which I found fascinating when they came out to bask in the sunshine. That field has now been completely built over with a housing estate.



It took much longer to get to school from there, which we did either on foot or with me on a tricycle and my brother on a two-wheel bike, usually together with other local children. There was hardly any road traffic to worry about and military vehicles made so much noise they could be heard long before they appeared, usually in slow-moving columns.

On the main road opposite, was a large house (Abingworth Hall) which, much later, I found had belonged to a Sir Oswald Mosley – the grandfather of the notorious leader of the British Fascist Party Sir Oswald Mosley. It had been taken over by the military – I think Canadian. They had sentries posted all around and always sent us away but there was a large pond which attracted us with our little fishing nets so it was an ongoing game with us to avoid them.

One evening when my father was visiting, we walked with him up the steep hill towards Storrington. When we reached the top it was already quite dark and looking back towards London, we could clearly see searchlights, flashes and the bright burning sky reflecting major fires. Just on the left, past that big house, there was a telegraph pole. On one occasion we found it smashed and were told a military vehicle had gone out of control, rolled down the hill and two soldiers had been killed – true or just another rumour?

There was a little orchard in a garden, next to the main road where we lived. As I was youngest and smallest I was the one lifted over the wall by the local children living in our road to go and pick the apples. What I did not know was that the owner kept a close watch on his fruit trees. Within a very short time there was a loud bellow and most of the kids ran for it, leaving me on the wrong side of the wall. I was terrified but somehow, someone pulled me back over the wall and we also ran away. I believe the owner recognised who I was and later visited my mother to make a complaint but she never scolded me.

While living there we used to pass Linfields Mushroom Farm on the way to and from school. Somehow, I and a few others got enlisted to sort through mountains of waste clinker to salvage coke pieces for the heating appliances. It was an awful job for which I think we got something like 6p. each (2 1/2 new p). I only did it once. I remember the buildings as being very run down with rusty frames and in a very poor state of maintenance – maybe due to the war.

At home, we had a small radio run on an accumulator battery. The accumulator was in a glass case and I was the one with the task of taking it into a hardware shop on the road to Storrington to get it re-charged. That accumulator was extremely heavy for me and I used to get on the bus which I think only ran once a week on market day. The conductor always complained bitterly and lectured me to sit still with the accumulator on the floor between my feet. Looking back, it was very dangerous and would never be allowed now. I must have paid attention as I never had an accident but just think of it, a small boy on a bus with a glass accumulator filled with acid! I seem to recall the accumulator was exchanged at the shop for a re-charged one. On one occasion while on the bus we passed a coloured man, who I now believe must have been Jomo Kenyatta, who I found out recently was then living locally.

We spent periods of time back in Dulwich and experienced the Blitz and a short time in Torquay with an uncle and aunt who had been bombed out in London.

Back in Thakeham, my brother and I were on a list to be shipped off to Canada. However, we both contracted chicken pox and ended up in an isolation hospital - I don't know where. We missed the sailing. All I do remember is looking out of a hospital window one day and seeing a Hunt in full chase galloping along an open field, all the riders in their hunting pink and what a wonderful sight it was even though it was in the distance.

That winter there was a period of deep snow which often came over the tops of my little Wellington boots on the way to and from school. My chilblains were excruciatingly painful.

At that time houses were normally only heated by open fires, burning coal or wood and the kitchen oven was an Aga or similar. The kitchen was the only really warm room in the home. Fireplace hearths, if they were being used, had to be cleaned of their cinders and ash every morning and re-laid with paper and kindling and then relit when needed. I mention this because children were usually given the task of gathering the wood for this repetitive job. My brother and I learned to carry out these chores and how to not make a mess when clearing the fine ash from the grate. It also meant that homes had their own store of dry wood, collected and prepared during the summer months. We also learned how to use a chopper safely to prepare the firewood. It was a real skill and needed discipline if injuries were to be avoided. Bedrooms usually had fireplaces too but in my experience were only used if someone was ill in bed. During the cold winter nights, ice formed on the inside of the window panes and made the most amazing intricate and beautiful patterns. I never ceased to wonder at this and it made up a little for the morning misery of getting up in a freezing cold bedroom, to admire what 'Jack Frost' had created during the night.

Then my mother fell ill again and had to go to hospital in London and we were taken in by the Betteridge family who ran the Yew Tree Poultry Farm in Merrywood Lane. It must have been an emergency as we were collected one night and walked to the farm.

Mr and Mrs Betteridge lived in a very old, small and quaint cottage with low ceilings and I think no electricity or mains water. They were a very kind family; they had three children, Margaret, Henry and Phillip, all older than us.

We were very happy there but it was an even longer walk/ride to and from school. Sometimes, by prior arrangement, two of our teachers who had a little car, picked us up when we waited at the corner of Merrywood Lane and the main road from Storrington – what joy!

The Betteridges also kept a few goats, which I greatly appreciated and could play with and learned to milk them but we had goats' milk which I have never been keen on. The smell of it and of goats' milk cheese brings those times back very sharply.

Mr Betteridge kept a shot gun over the kitchen's outside door and the rumpus made by the chickens at night whenever a fox was attacking them got him out of bed and grabbing his gun. I don't know how successful he was in shooting the foxes.

Opposite the farm, just a little way down the lane was a large private house (I now know this is 'Little Thakeham', designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens), set well back on a long drive. The military had taken this over too and the guards were always on duty and kept us out but my brother said he used to find a way in, as there was a large pond to play about with. After the war, this became an exclusive hotel but more recently returned to being a private residence. All of this time while we were in Thakeham, there was a big military presence, although they kept a low profile. The camps must have been carefully tucked away but we sometimes came across army vehicles of many types on the roads and the troops spending time in Storrington. I think mainly they were Canadian.

Occasionally, we saw RAF 60ft. 'Queen Mary' trailers being towed down the little winding lanes and saw how difficult it was for the lorries to manoeuvre their way along. I think they were being used to recover the wreckage of crashed aeroplanes.

I don't think we ever suffered from not having enough to eat. The official rations made life hard in the towns and cities but in the country there always seemed to be eggs, milk and plenty of fresh vegetables. Many people kept chickens and had their own fruit and vegetable plots and it was common practice at home to prepare and bottle fruit in season to prepare for the winter months. Perhaps, in the countryside, families still do but I don't know anyone now who does this when everything is available throughout the year at the nearest supermarket.

So at the right time the children went blackberry-picking and mushroom-picking and Mrs Betteridge knew what could and could not be eaten. Another family living just off the main road kept bees and I was always a bit nervous of going near the hives in their garden. They showed me how the bees kept to specific 'flight paths' and if they weren't interfered with, were quite safe. The honey these people made and sold was delicious.

Chanctonbury Ring was an impressive landmark on the South Downs but it is now much reduced, due I believe to the severe storm in autumn 1987 when many trees were felled.

Storrington was a very quiet town then, hardly any traffic at all, which is difficult to imagine with today's congestion. I feel sure there were more trees along the kerbsides in Storrington then but can't remember exactly where they were.

The limits of our world at that time were how far we could walk or ride to on our bikes when we were not in school. We had great freedom to wander and I remember getting terribly muddy on the farms or slipping into muddy streams and having to try to clean up before returning home. Also being chased out of fields by bulls, or were they just inquisitive cattle that seemed so huge to us then? Is the stream where the watercress beds were, still running near Storrington?

Occasionally, bigger, beefier local children were aggressive towards us and I always rose to a challenge which I often could not meet and on at least one occasion my brother had to rescue me from a painful situation.

As very young children we did not miss not having many of the fresh fruits such as bananas and oranges which we now take for granted. Sweets were strictly rationed or just completely unavailable until many years after the war had ended and I don't think I had an ice cream before about 1948. Not many people had cars and those who did could not get petrol for their use and the bicycle was the common form of transport. New bicycles were unavailable until quite a time after the war so children made do with whatever their parents could find and I vividly remember a school friend getting a birthday present of a shiny new Raleigh bicycle in about 1947 and his father telling me it cost him two weeks wages. Most in our class at school came to admire it and beg to have a ride. In 1945 as the war came to an end my father ordered a new car but he did not get delivery until 1951, six years after having ordered it, as most of post-war production went for export sales. He had ordered an Austin '16' but by the time his name came up for delivery the model had completely changed to an Austin A70 'Hampshire'.

Together with our parents after the war, we visited Mrs Betteridge from time to time and I returned in the 1950's to visit her on my own. Mr Betteridge had died and later, Mrs Betteridge moved from the poultry farm to a smaller, more practical home. I took my new wife to meet her and later again our young son, before Mrs Betteridge too passed away. I often wonder if any of the Betteridge children stayed in the area but my few questions at the time did not bring forward any information other than that Margaret was still living locally but I could not trace her.

Many years later I was driving to the coast and stopped off to see Thakeham village and Storrington and then the poultry farm in Merrywood Lane and was totally confused when I could not find it. I did find the old oak gate post in the hedge and worked out that the cottage and poultry farm buildings had all disappeared. Then further up the lane I came across an imposing new entrance and paved drive and I found that in their place stood a grand property set in large grounds, called A'Becket Place. I was astonished as it looked as though it had been there for centuries. It seems that the Linfields had bought the farm, demolished the cottage and other buildings, landscaped the whole area and replaced everything with this property which had been transported from up on the Downs somewhere near Worthing or Lewes, after being completely dismantled and then rebuilt where it now stood!

1939-45 were momentous times for most of the world and a great upheaval for millions whose lives were changed forever. As a little boy I never considered that Britain and her Allies could lose and am eternally grateful to my parents and other adults who looked after me that they never instilled in me any fear of the future during those war years. Maybe I just never thought deeply about anything in order to make it easier to live through those difficult times.

I am retired with a wife and two adult children, a son and a daughter. My brother Geoffrey passed away recently, leaving a widow, two grown sons, a daughter-in-law and three grandchildren.

Alan Simmonds
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