

THE EVACUEE

I was evacuated four times.

A few days before the outbreak of war I was evacuated to Isleham (pronounced eyeslam) about 20 miles from Cambridge on the edge of the fens. I was 8 years old and was accompanied by my maternal grandparents and Alan, aged 9, the boy from next door. We went to live with great Aunt Anne, a farmer's widow. The accommodation was two up and one down with a scullery lean-to at the back. Alan and I shared a bed in my Aunt's bedroom. The bedroom ^{window} was firmly closed at all times, to protect us from the strong night air.

My aunt filled the walls of her house, not with pictures or family photographs. She preferred framed quotations of the type: "The Wages of Sin is Death" and "God is the Head of this house, the unseen guest at every meal, the silent listener to every conversation".

The village had no electricity and no mains drainage. Our water came from a hand pump. Gas was installed, for those that wanted it, a few weeks after our arrival. Aunt Anne certainly didn't want it. It was unnecessary and new-fangled. Paraffin-oil lamps were quite good enough.

Aunt Anne had no wireless; radio upset the weather. There were no newspapers either, except for the "Christian Herald" and I think this was passed on from the farmer next door. Neighbours told us that war had been declared.

The arrival of two new townie boys at school provided a diversion for the other children and possibly also for the teachers.

We were figures of fun and subject to much teasing. There were many fights. Gradually these scraps stopped as it became apparent that we could inflict damage as well as receive it. I learned my first swear words during this period. I didn't know what "a stupid li'l old bugger" was, but it didn't sound very complimentary.

Shortly after our arrival, a Jewish Junior School was evacuated to Isleham. Alan and I rapidly lost our novelty value. Fights ensued very quickly between the two groups of schoolchildren; villagers versus vacees. We were quickly adopted as locals. I don't remember having any aversion to taking part in these skirmishes.

The sudden presence of a lot of Jewish children in a village deep in the country was a great shock to the villagers. For many people, their only previous knowledge of jews seemed to be derived from the Bible. Imagine the outrage when football was arranged on the village green on a Sunday afternoon. I think it was quickly banned.

Alan and I quickly discovered that we had more in common with the Jewish boys than we had with most of the village boys. Like us, the Jewish boys were townees. We had grand ideas. We imagined that electricity, bathrooms, lavatories, buses and trips to the cinema were part of everyday life. Countryfolk found some (if not all) of these things to be sinful.

I ~~never~~ remember becoming very friendly with a boy called Wolf; short for Wolfgang. We arranged that when the fighting started between the school factions ~~that~~ we never had to confront each other.

We attended chapel three times on Sunday; morning and evening services and Sunday School in the afternoon. I have vivid memories of the preaching. It was very loud with much waving of arms. It was intended to remind me that my sinful thoughts would cause me to burn in hell. Dancing and the cinema were continually denounced almost every Sunday. I can't, in retrospect, imagine why. Isleham had no cinema or dance hall.

There was one bus a week to Cambridge, one a week to Ely, one to Mildenhall for the market and two to Newmarket. Isleham was served by the railway but the station was about a mile outside the village. I think there were two trains a day; but not on Sundays. There were one or two cars in the village but no petrol. Horses provided a large part of the tractive effort on farms. The farm on which I was living got its first tractor in 1944.

How did we entertain ourselves in the long winter evenings? There was no wireless. We were envious of most other children who could listen to ITMA and Bandwagon. Card games were banned by Aunt Anne, even snap. Ludo, Snakes & Ladders and Fiddlywinks were just about tolerated.

The highlight of the winter of 1939/40 was a visit to a matinee performance of "Babes in the Wood" in Newmarket. I think this was probably my first visit to a theatre. Aunt Anne thought even this was pretty sinful but on this occasion my grandmother's will prevailed.

This was the period of the phoney war. Alan returned to his parents in London at Christmas. I returned to mine at Easter 1940. I was extremely glad. My grandmother made a

great effort to make life tolerable. Aunt Anne, I imagine, was also glad. She had no children of her own and suddenly she had two adults and two scruffy little boys deposited on her.

After a few months the war at home suddenly hotted up. I remember the first daylight raid on London vividly. Within a short time large fires were started and smoke filled the northern sky. The fires were in the East End and we could see huge clouds of smoke from south of the river. I don't remember any bombs falling close by on this occasion.

Within a few weeks the nightly blitz started. The bombs came closer. One fell about 100 yards from our air-raid shelter and killed a schoolfriend and his family. The noise during some of these raids was tremendous. We lived about $\frac{1}{4}$ mile from a battery of anti-aircraft guns. I often saw German planes caught in searchlights but I never saw one shot down. AA guns seemed to deserve fully their reputation as one of the three most useless things in the world.

Another evacuation was required. This time to Three Bridges in Sussex. I didn't want to go. It meant leaving friends. However, in the event I enjoyed the experience. We returned to London in time for the buzz-bombs. One landed very near. Another evacuation; back to Isleham. After the buzz-bombs finished, back to London. This was just in time for the V2 rockets. Three Bridges again. I celebrated VE in Three Bridges. I didn't want to return to London.

During the war I went to five different schools. I went to ~~two~~ ^{three} of them twice.

Roy Saunders