

Evacuee Children, 1939–45

Very recently I was introduced to three very charming ladies who, over a cup of tea, shared with me memories of their refugee status in Deddington.

On 1st September 1939 Joyce, Doreen and Pauline aged 13 waved farewell to their parents on Becontree Station (Dagenham, East London) to spend, as they were told by their elders, two weeks in the country. The outbreak of war was expected daily as were air raids on London. At that time, many schools in and around the city were evacuated lock, stock and barrel and, unbeknown to the girls this edict had been passed on Campbell Senior Girls School where they were pupils.

Waving their tearful parents goodbye, the girls were torn between feelings of thrilling excitement and just a little fear of the unknown. But soon the general happy mood experienced by pupils at any school outing took over. Noses were pressed against carriage windows while they sped towards Banbury. Few of them had ever ventured so far into the country and few had ever been on holiday on their own. But of course, they did not feel on their own because the 50 or so girls were accompanied by their headmistress and two lady teachers and were surrounded by their friends.

High spirits of adventure were only slightly dimmed when on arrival at Banbury station they were ushered into a shed to use 'toilettes' consisting of a plank with 12 holes over 12 buckets. On re-assembly each pupil was handed a carrier bag (in pupil speak known as weekend ration) with corned-beef, a packet of biscuits, a bar of chocolate and an orange. Midland Red buses now ferried them to Deddington, their final destination. Clutching their small luggage, with gas-masks hung over their shoulders, they were led into the upper room of the British Legion where village ladies and gentlemen were gathered and where they were offered tea, squash and biscuits.

A lady billeting officer encouraged the villagers who had volunteered a home for one or two children, to take their pick. Soon only a few were left, by now a bit anxious but (if memories have not blocked out emotions at the time) just dimly aware that there was a problem.

In Pauline's case, the problem was her 10-year old brother Terry, who, together with a few other younger siblings of Campbell Senior School girls, were now members of the group. Pauline's parents' parting wish had been that she should be billeted with her brother. She remembers clearly busying herself with wiping the tables. By this act she unconsciously drew attention to her usefulness which finally found her a home and a foster mother who, alas, had only a little spare bedroom. She and brother Terry were parted which, in retrospect, was an excellent solution, his foster parents had boys of his own age and he spent many happy years with them ...

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Our Evacuation Day

It was the 1st of September 1939
When I left that dear home of mine
Parents took us to Becontree Station
To be taken to an unknown destination
Soon we boarded an express train
And with our noses pressed against
the window panes

We waved to our loved ones to say
goodbye
Most of us held back our tears
we did not cry
I was 13 years old my brother
Terry was 10
When we'd see them again
we knew not when

A few readers of my account in the February issue of Deddington News expressed surprise at the up-beat memories of our three ladies, Joyce, Doreen and Pauline, of the evacuation of children from London to the country. Joan Davis (who introduced me to these intrepid Eastenders) and I quite expected recollections of homesickness, bewilderment and not a little bit of anger when they discovered that the two weeks in the country were to turn into a long-term stay. Now read on ...

Not all the girls immediately took to their foster families and over the first few weeks some changes were made. Doreen remembers arriving with her little sister at her new billet and finding no one in to greet them. 'What did you do?' shouted both Joan and I in some horror. Doreen's logical reply: 'We went for a little walk round the village and by the time we returned our foster parents were in!' Joyce shared a small bedroom and one bed with another girl (sleeping head to toe) until she was re-homed with one of her teachers who had acquired a house in Hudson Street.

All three ladies remember with glee having PT in Deddington Primary School's playground, clad in navy blue regulation knickers and liberty bodices 'showing off' to the village boys who congregated round the fence. And talking of schooling, it wasn't easy for the three teachers in charge of 50 children to arrange the required lessons.

At first the village and London children had to work in two shifts in the Primary School premises, taking turn and turn about mornings and afternoons. Later on all the London children attended their 3R lessons in the first floor room of the British Legion, Domestic Science in their teacher's house in Hudson Street and Cookery Classes in Forester's Hall in the Tchure. The latter was also the meeting place for the Village Youth Club which they joined enthusiastically. Some of their classmates found homes in Hempton and Clifton. Most of them met for the first time the inconvenience of outside toilets and lack of indoor baths with running hot water. With great merriment the following story was recalled: Their friend, billeted in Clifton wanted a bath in the absence of her foster mother. She persuaded Joyce and two visiting friends to help her carry a tub to the bedroom, fill it with hot water from the downstairs range and, at the end of her ablutions, help her carry the tub with water downstairs. All went well until the descent when the water began to flop about and eventually spilled in cascades down the stairs. The visitors fled leaving their poor friend to clear up and confess to her foster parents!

Just a few girls in class went back to their homes in London in the period of the 'phoney war' and never returned. Most of them remained in Deddington. A few times a year their parents came to visit them from London by coach. Doreen recalls her excitement at her parents' first visit, running down New Street to meet them, shedding tears of joy. Sadly her father, later in 1940, was killed at his work place during an air raid. Life in Deddington certainly had its ups and downs, as Joyce recalled but, she said, 'we felt safe'.

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Our three girls from Campbell Senior Girls School, London, had now reached the ripe old age of 14 when, in the 1940s, official schooling ceased locally. As luck would have it, another group of evacuee children from West Ham resided in North Aston Hall with their teachers who were able to offer further education in English, Maths, Bookkeeping, Shorthand, Typing, Art, etc. Quite a few of the Campbell girls were given the chance to attend. Doreen and Pauline

remember well cycling, or walking, up to North Aston for this course, which lasted another two years and 'finished' their education more thoroughly than they could have expected had they remained in London. Doreen was the first to move back into the city and into a secretarial job. Having left part of her heart in Deddington, and terrified by attacks of flying bombs, she returned to Deddington where her widowed mother had settled.

Pauline's first job was in a Banbury office. Then she too returned to her family in London. A few months before the war ended, she got a job in a Whitehall typing pool from where she was eventually moved to the Treasury Department. She particularly remembers crying bitter tears while writing citations for posthumous awards. Not all was gloom, however, the balcony of her office overlooked the Cenotaph, in a prime position to observe military ceremonies and, what the British Forces do best, colourful 'march pasts'.

To Joyce, aged 14, it was suggested that she would love working with children. An influential friend of a friend of her teacher had taken into her temporary care two little boys, a baby and toddler, whose world-renowned parents were also in the temporary care of HM Prison Service. Although Joyce too would have loved to continue her schooling in North Aston Hall, and now says that she knew nothing at all about children, she accepted, aged 14, that her elders knew best. For two years she worked for long hours daily as a nanny's assistant. Life was not unbearable and she lived in a family who had many interesting guests. (To say that she met some most interesting people is an understatement.)

An advert, placed by Oxford's postmaster, for trainee telegraphy operators offered greater independence. Undaunted by distance she cycled to Aynho station, caught the train, attended an interview and was accepted for training. With the help of friends she moved into Oxford, completed her training successfully and soon became very proficient at fast touch-typing. On night shift the telegraphers had to copy coded messages from the Royal Navy, the Army and the RAF (all coded in numbers needing a high degree of concentration.) Day shift work included messages sent by phone from the civilian population, industry and business.

Many thanks to Joyce, Doreen and Pauline for letting us share their memories and to Joan Davies who introduced me to this happy trio. Thanks to our evacuee friends, who more than 50 years on have given us such a caring and positive picture of Deddington during the war years.

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The complete collection of Ruth Johnson's writings, which originally appeared in Deddington News between 1990 and 2010, can be found [here](#)