

Doreen Stewart's story of being an evacuee to Deddington in 1939

Rob Forsyth



Doreen & husband Ken in 2007

60th Wedding Anniversary

Doreen Joan Stewart was born in 1926 in Greenwich where her parents Alfred (1891-1940) and Dorothy (1895-1962) lived. She and her sister Joyce (b.1930) were the youngest of their 5 children. When Doreen was 4 or 5 years old the family moved to Dagenham in Essex - a rapidly growing 'new town' to which Londoners were being relocated. All the houses had electricity, running water and, best luxury of all, inside toilets!

Doreen went to Campbell Road School and Joyce to the infant school. During the phoney war in 1939 a decision was made to evacuate the school, along with thousands of other London children, to the safety of the countryside and Deddington was selected for Campbell School - although no one thought to tell the children where they were going! They arrived with their teachers on 1 September.



(Back, l to r) Doris Gore, Joan Ley, ?, Pauline Savill, Doreen Stewart, Sylvia Petre, ? .

(Middle, l to r) Joan Wood (twin), Doris Newton, Jenny Smith, Violet Collman, ?, Rose Bennett, Rosie Stavelly

(Front, l to r) Joyce Wood (twin), ?, ?, Bernadette Ryan, ?, Joyce Herbert

Their teachers - not in the photograph - were Miss Wise (Head), Miss Gwen Millard and Miss Joan Murfitt

Initially, Doreen and Joyce were sent to Adderbury to live with Mr & Mrs Birtle at 1 Hillside Cottage in Water Lane. It was on the radio in the nearby Bakehouse belonging to Mr Birtles' father that they heard Prime Minister Chamberlain declare war on Germany.

After just a week they were told they were to go to Deddington to join the rest of the school. This quick change was very unsettling, particularly for Joyce, and, to make it worse, when they arrived at their new home at No 3 New Street Mr & Mrs Jack & Florrie Hirons were not in. So the two girls were left at the door and told to walk around for a while and come back later! Doreen thinks this is when they first met a teenage Sid Berry who lived across the road from No 3 and who tried to comfort them.



Jack & Florrie Hirons' cottage No 3 New Street (l) and in the garden (r)

The Hirons eventually came home and the girls were welcomed into a house which also had the Hirons' two young boys for company. The main contrast between Deddington and Dagenham they noticed immediately was that there was no electricity and the toilet was a 'one holer' in a shed at the end of the garden with no lights of course!

Doreen remembers going up the fields with Jack Hirons and his dog and ferret and then having delicious rabbit pie for tea.

The evacuee children had their school classes in the top room of the British Legion building but went to the school for assembly and to play in the playground.

Alfred and Dorothy, along with other Campbell School parents, would visit Deddington periodically on a privately hired bus. Doreen vividly remembers the first time it arrived and parked by The Manor House. She and Joyce ran up the road with tears of excitement in their eyes at seeing their parents again.

On one visit Doreen took a photograph with her box brownie camera of her parents standing in front of a large tree trunk. This had been mounted on wheels by the Home Guard who planned to use it as a road block at the corner by Castle End if the Germans approached the village on the Clifton road. A Lewis machine gun position was located behind the adjacent wall with a hole in the wall to fire through.



The photograph has a very sad footnote because, after returning to London and his war work at the Woolwich Arsenal, Alfred was one of a number of employees who were killed in a bombing raid on 7 September 1940 which scored a direct hit on their shelter.



After a while the Hirons found that looking after 4 children was just a bit too much for them and the girls moved to living with Jack Callow and his family at The Old House on Philcote Street. Doreen remembers that she was quite keen on their son Bob who joined the Navy as did her friend Sid Berry. She also remembers that the local girls were not all pleased that the evacuee girls attracted the attention of the Deddington boys!



When Doreen left Deddington School at 14 she and her great friend and also an evacuee, Pauline Savill, elected not to return to London because it seemed still unsafe. They went instead to a Further Education College which had also been evacuated from London to North Aston Hall. Here they learnt typing and shorthand once a week. At first they walked there each day but eventually got bicycles.

She left the College aged 16 and went to learn shorthand and typing full time in Banbury.

The bombing in London seemed to have eased off by 1943 so Mum Dorothy took the two girls home to Dagenham. Doreen got a job with the Colonial Mutual Life Society opposite St Pauls Cathedral. But in June 1944 Hitler's new weapon the V1 flying bomb – nicknamed the Doodlebug or Buzz bomb – started to arrive over London and Dorothy decided to go back to Deddington.

Dorothy was able to secure a post as housekeeper to Miss Sermon who lived at (now) Denmar House on the Market. She and the girls are standing on its steps in the picture right.



But Dorothy had her eye on a nice little house in The Tchure where they could live as a family in their own house and so they moved again and Dorothy remained thereafter in Deddington .

Doreen got a secretarial job in Banbury with The British Motor Boat Manufacturing Company. The office in which she and the other typists worked overlooked the railway and they would wave to the trains as they went by. An enterprising and intrigued fireman on a local train that regularly got waived at decided that he would go and meet his fan club and did...and met Doreen...and the rest, as they say, is history!



The photograph on the left was taken in 1946 on Deddington Hill.

Doreen and Ken were married in Deddington Church on 5 March 1947. In 2019 Doreen still lives in Kidlington where she and Ken spent most of their married life and where she is regularly visited by her daughters Ann, Susan, Marian and their families.

Footnote: Doreen told me her story over several cups of coffee and delicious shortbread. Her secretarial skills are still sharp: she emails and surfs the net on her Apple computer and always had a printed version of my draft ready for inspection when I visited. It was a real pleasure to meet her and exchange memories of Deddington in the old days particularly as she and Pauline Savill had been close friends since school days. Pauline's story can be found in *A Parish at War* on p.131 "Peter & Pauline Franklyn"

To see all of Doreen's pictures please go to:

<https://www.deddington.org.uk/gallery/index.php/WW2/Evacuees/Doreen-Ashton-nee-Stewart>