

An evacuee remembers (abridged)

By Derek Clifton

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What was it like being an evacuee?

I have to go back seventy years in my memory bank so there might be a few areas that may seem a bit sketchy.

1. What was the train journey like?

The train journey to Maidstone normally took about an hour from Herne Hill, but as the train had to stop every time an aircraft flew overhead in case it was a German bomber that may attack us, the journey took much longer. I had an apple and sandwiches, but there was nothing to drink. The train had no toilets and we just held on until Maidstone when we could go to the toilet. There were no adults in our compartment of the train. I had been on a train before on a day trip to Brighton.

2. How did I feel about leaving London?

Well, it was quite exciting really, knowing that we were being taken to safety and it also gave us reassurance that we were being cared for, even by strangers. Not knowing what was to happen next was also quite exciting to me.

3. How did you feel about leaving your parents?

I didn't actually leave my parents so much as they left me! My mother was not married when she had me, which is quite common now, but was not then. I was farmed off to live with my mother's sister, my aunt Enid, who had a son and daughter - Rene and Ernest - and a husband - Uncle Fred who was a Chief Petty Officer engineer in the Royal Navy.

4. Did you have any brothers or sisters?

Yes, I have two sisters, although only one at that time, born three years after me - Yvonne - who was not evacuated during the war and who lived with our mother.

5. When did you see your mother again?

After about a year, Uncle Arthur drove my mother down to see me. She was so upset when she saw me, she told the Filmars (the people I was staying with) that she wanted to take me home. I could never really understand that - although I must admit, at the time I never gave it much thought - but off I went in the car - my first ride in a car - back to London. I stayed with my mother for only a short time before returning to my Aunt Enid's.

6. How did you get on with local children?

There were no local children near where I stayed. At school the evacuees stuck together in an 'us versus them' situation. We also felt superior, thinking of them as 'country bumpkins' compared with us city types who considered ourselves more worldly, even at the age of seven.

7. As a city boy, how did you adapt to country life?

I was sent to a farm - Pond Farm - to stay with Mr and Mrs Filmar. I was happy there - even though they had no children. I had Derek Butler to play with when he came across to the farm. We walked together each school day to catch the bus to Maidstone and would often deviate from the direct route - about two miles away to the bus pick-up. We didn't know how far it was really as all signposts had been removed to prevent any enemy landing from finding their way about.

We were in trouble one day when we broke into a nest of partridge eggs and crushed several of them to see if there were any chicks inside. The landowner soon traced us and we were reprimanded by both Longs and Filmars.

8. What was the most difficult thing to get used to?

I took to life as an evacuee on a farm like a duck to water. The only hard bit was the journey to and from school: in London, the school was only ten minutes away.

9. What did you like the most?

Living on the farm I suppose. It was totally different from living in London in every way. Each day after school I could wander about looking at the animals, sometimes feeding them with Mr Filmar. Sometimes Derek Butler and I would sit on top of the air-raid shelter and watch the German aircraft fly over, counting them in and out, but there were not many raids in that early part of the war.

10. What work did you do on the farm?

Well it would be true to say nothing much; I was always closely supervised by Mr Filmar whenever I was 'helping', but the only serious thing I did was when a cow went through the ice on the pond. Mr Filmar was too heavy to go on the thin ice to tie a rope to the cow's horns so sent me! I felt very brave and made much of it in a letter home afterwards. I could easily have joined the cow in the water, I afterwards thought.

11. What do you remember about the food?

We ate well and heartily during the time spent on Pond Farm. Living on a farm meant farmers and their families had food throughout the war. There appeared to be very few restrictions - certainly in the early stages of the war. Later there were rules that forbade them from living off their own land and livestock.

12. What do you remember most vividly about your time as an evacuee?

You must remember that I was evacuated three more times after Pond Farm, whenever the Germans bombed London intensively.

I went to Skellow in Yorkshire twice and to somewhere in Surrey with my cousin Rene, but that was for only a few weeks as she was to return to marry Arthur before he went overseas in the Army. Rene's brother, Ernest, was already in the army and was later reported killed in Italy. My most vivid memory was while at Skellow a couple of years later. (Skellow is north of Doncaster and we went there when the bombing was quite intense - shortly after we arrived the Germans bombed Doncaster Railway Station.)

Anyway, we played football in the next street as it was more level than the one in which I was billeted - with a miner and his five miner sons.

Looking out at the game from her bedroom window was a girl named Rosemary Skipp and, for me, it was love at first sight. We saw quite a lot of each other when I was free from paying football, but the five sons of the miner told me that she was only interested as I was foreign to the area - so spoiling my dream. As a born romantic I can recall that as, perhaps, my most vivid memory.