

By June Stillman, born 1932, evacuated to Elstow

DON'T FORGET YOUR GAS MASK

This is what we read and were told,
time and time again during the:
1939 - 1945 WAR



I was a little disappointed I was just too old to have a Mickey Mouse gas mask. I had to have an adult one (as above). They really smelt terrible. So pleased I didn't have to use mine.



Note:
The children's
gas mask tied
to their luggage.

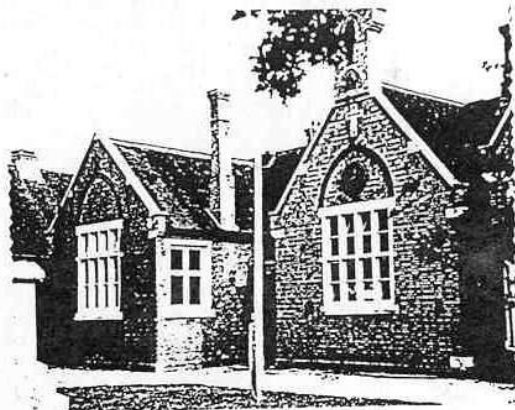


Our first destination was Bedford Railway Station, we walked from here into the Town Centre, where we joined others to collect our brown bag of goodies. I know there was a large bar of chocolate in the bag, but we immediately had to hand our bags over to our home mother, never to see the chocolate etc. again. I can guess who had the chocolate.



Our first stop was Elstow School.

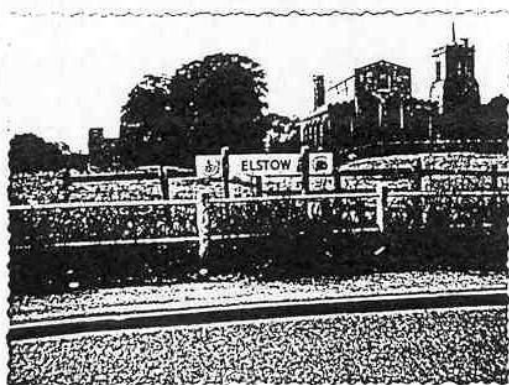
What I can remember very clearly is, many of us were allowed to play in the large sand pit. I never experienced anything like this before.



At first I didn't take any notice that one by one the children were taken from the sand pit. It was not until there were only a handful of us left that I began to wonder where everyone had gone. Mind you at the age of 7 I wasn't over worried. I was thoroughly enjoying myself.

It was not until many years later I found out what must have been happening, during what seemed a very long time. Apparently the people we were billeted with, were allowed to choose their Evacuee/s if they so wished. I possibly was too skinny to be of much use.

I however along with 2 or 3 others went with my home mother. (not a very good move)



MY FIRST BILLET was with Mrs. Thody a lovely lady in West End. I was only there three months as I had to make room for Stanley who had broken his leg just before the war and now was being united with us. Our home mother felt he should be with her. I think Mrs. Thody was sorry to see me go. I remember her giving me a mars bar, but I didn't have to tell my home mother, as she would have taken it away and given it to John. I only moved next door.

MY SECOND BILLET was with a Mr. & Mrs. Cooper, they didn't really want the bother of children, but as they had space they didn't have much choice.

One very unhappy experience I can remember, we only had an outside toilet, this was not unusual in this village, but this one was quite different. I'm not making it up when I tell you, to get to the toilet you had to walk at least two to three hundred yards, this was alright in the day time when it was light, but a different story when it was dark. I don't mind telling you I was terrified.

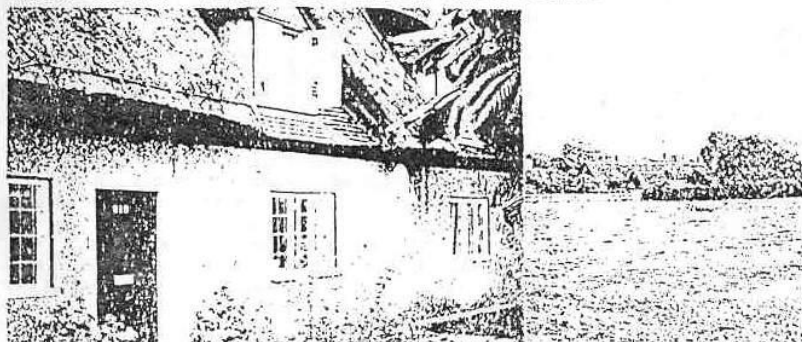
To try and cure me of being afraid, Mrs. Cooper would pull my buttons off my pyjamas, she then made me sit outside and sew them on again, so anyone passing by would see me. At least I learnt how to sew on buttons. Thankfully this only happened twice, but I hated it at the time.

Years later when I visited a friend in one of these cottages and I needed to go to the toilet, for quickness I went on my bicycle.

One thing I do remember while at this billet. Mr. Cooper took me in a horse and trap each Saturday, to a pig market in Bedford. On our return home we sat down to bubble and squeak and lemon curd tart. For the nine months I was here this never differed.

MY THIRD BILLET this time to a Mr. & Mrs. Pritlove, they lived on the edge of the green. They had one daughter younger than me, but very spoilt. She had a thing at breaking her toys and blaming me which got me in a lot of trouble. So this only lasted 3 months. One good thing that came out of this third billet, I was taught how to knit.

MY FOURTH BILLET by this time I got quite used to packing my bags, so once again I started out for yet another billet and now just 15 months into the war and 8 years of age, but this time I went to a really kind lady named Mrs. Keep, she was a widow and had one son who was about to get married. I did learn later however she just couldn't see me move on any more. My home then for the next 17 years was 212, Church End, Elstow.



After the war most of the Evacuees returned to their homes. As I had no parents Mrs. Keep who I called Auntie asked if she could adopt me, but owing to age this was not possible, but if she liked she could foster me. which is what she did. I was still in the care of Middlesex County Council and continued to be so until I was 18



SUNDAY WORSHIP When I was first evacuated at the age of 7, for 3-4 years my pattern for a Sunday never changed.

Auntie was a fine Christian lady who worshipped herself at the small Bunyans Chapel in the village, but she was not allowed to take me with her. I with a number of other children in the morning walked over 2 miles to a C of E service, then back for dinner, after which we walked back again about 2 miles but this time to a Mission for Sunday School. Then in the evening a little tired we stayed in the village and went to the C of E Church. Just how much at this age could we take in.

THE DISLIKE OF BLACK STOCKINGS.

As soon as I was old enough to wear stockings, black they had to be for school, I made many holes in them thinking this would be the end, but I just had the job of mending them. The other children laughed at me, but this made no difference.

Margaret Hardcastle was 13 when the war broke out. she was indeed very useful looking after all of us younger ones. It was obvious that our home mother made good use of her, her work never seemed done. At 14 she went into service, but spent when possible, most of her free time with us. Auntie was very good to her, there was always a warm welcome for her at our home.

