

## Memories of Evacuation during the Second World War

When the 1939 - 1945 war started on Sunday 3rd September 1939 I was 9 years old and was an only child. I lived with my mother and father in the village of River, just outside Dover, in Kent. My mother had three sisters and a brother, all married, as well as her mother, all living close at hand in the village. Amongst their families I had three cousins, Colin and Keith, who were brothers, and Jean. We were all very close and were frequently to be found in each other's houses. Keith was older than Colin, Jean and I and in 1939 went to Dover County School whereas we three went to River Elementary School. All of us lived in what I have come to think of as an idyllic environment. We each lived in loving families in a sleepy village in a quite lovely location, roamed far and wide over unspoilt fields and woodland; we played by - and in - the river where we caught tiddlers, tadpoles and newts and sailed our boats; we picked primroses, bluebells, cowslips, knew about the birds and found their nests - etc. It was wonderful.

I can't really remember our lives as children being unduly affected by that part of the war which came to be known as the 'phoney war' except that we now had air raid shelters in our gardens and had to know what to do if there was an air raid warning, especially if we were out somewhere without our parents, and we had gas masks. Having assimilated these new things our lives largely went on as before. I became 10 years old in January 1940 and soon things were to change.... rapidly.

In May came the events leading up to Dunkirk - Red Cross trains going one after the other up the railway line just across the valley from our house, trainload after trainload, so it seemed, all streaming up the line away from the port of Dover. Then came the radio announcement that many areas were to be designated evacuation areas and others were to be reception areas; I can well remember the announcer saying that Dover was to be an evacuation area and then my mother turning to my father and saying "that doesn't mean us, though, does it?" - a forlorn wish, born out of dread, I am sure, based on the fact that our village of River was just outside Dover! Well, of course it did mean us and so we waited for the evacuation instructions, my mother and father with

an ever-increasing sense of dread, fear and anxiety. When the instructions were published we learned that evacuation was to be by schools, and we were effectively to be placed in the care of our teachers who thus had a tremendous responsibility thrust upon them - not enough has been made of the debt of gratitude we all owe them for what they did for us in the ensuing years.

Evacuation day for me and most others in the Dover area was Sunday 2nd June 1940, and was a day that I shall never forget. We had to be outside our school at about 7am, as I recall it, with our cases, sandwiches and gas masks, and with a label tied somewhere on us saying who we were, etc. 'Buses arrived to take us to Dover Priory Railway Station and, having said our last goodbyes to our parents, we were herded aboard the 'buses for the couple of miles or so to the station. I think we had a sense of bewilderment mixed with one of adventure. We travelled up that same railway line on which we had seen the Red Cross trains and our teachers got us to take a last look at our home village through the train windows and then got us settled down for our journey to .....we knew not where - I've wondered many times since if the teachers knew where we were going; we certainly had no idea and neither had our parents.

I remember very little about the journey itself, but quite late in the afternoon we got off the train and found that we were in a place called Blackwood, but where was it? I can remember us all being marched across a level crossing through a crowd of people, many of whom were women who were crying, presumably because they were sorry for us. Then came the first clue as to where we were - we were put aboard brown/maroon coloured single-decker 'buses on the side of which were the words 'Western Mon' - we were in Monmouthshire. The 'buses drove us out of Blackwood and we were taken to a place called Aberbargoed, where we got off at the school, which was being used as a reception centre. Here we were given something to eat and drink and then we sat and waited, tired and missing our mothers and fathers. We became aware of an increasing number of people present at the school; they were our prospective foster parents and our numbers gradually dwindled as our friends (including my cousins Colin and Jean) were taken away by them. I can vaguely remember such statements as

"I'll have that one...." and "no, that one over there.....", until there were not very many of us left. . All a very unsettling experience for very young children. Finally a lady arrived who said she would have me and I was led off by her to her house. I have a dim memory of being shown a bedroom which was to be mine and the bathroom and toilet, but nothing more for that day.

I had been taken in by Mr and Mrs Idris Jones, and I believe Mrs Jones sent my mother and father a telegram straightaway to say where I was and that I was alright. I had really fallen on my feet, as luck would have it. The house was quite large, stood in its own grounds and gardens, was surrounded by a fence of iron railings and couldn't be seen from the road.

Mr Jones was a senior manager for Powell Duffryn who, prior to nationalisation, owned many of the coal mines in South Wales including the one down in the valley below Aberbargoed and Bargoed (I have always believed him to have been their Chief Electrical Engineer; although this may not have been correct he was certainly quite senior); he was almost regarded as the squire by many of the local people. The Jones's had a daughter, Esmé, who was about 19 or 20 and who really took me under her wing, and an older son, Cliff; both worked for Powell Duffryn and were, it seems, in reserved occupations. There were three cars at the house; Mr Jones used a small black Austin for work and had a rather nice green MG saloon (possibly a coupé) for other purposes and Cliff had an MG sports car, similar to those used by the police at the time. Use of the cars for leisure purposes was restricted, of course, because of the growing petrol shortage. Nevertheless, I remember being taken out in one or another of them from time to time, often when Mr Jones or Cliff made a work visit to one of the mines in their area. Back at home, in River, there were only two cars in the whole of our road, plus an AA motorbike and sidecar used by one of our near neighbours! As I recall it food was not really a problem at this relatively early time in the war - amongst other things, I can remember being introduced to Caerphilly cheese fresh from the farms up in the hills, and then there were welshcakes, which I'd never tasted before,

and whinberry pies, the fruit for which we picked by the pound from the mountainside just outside the village.

Aberbargoed was a large mining village which boasted (so it was said) the largest coal tip in Europe. There were sometimes 'scares' that the slag etc on the tip was moving, particularly after heavy rain. The worry, of course, was that it might engulf the houses built below it. Most of the houses were small and terraced - typical colliers' rows, in many cases built back-to-back, and the people who lived in them were completely dependent on the pit for employment. The village was on the Monmouthshire side of the River Rhymney, at that time the border between Monmouthshire and Glamorgan; the town of Bargoed was on the Glamorgan side and the pit was in between, on the floor of the valley. Water, already black with coal dust from pits upstream, was taken from the river for washing the coal and then returned to it blacker still. The river banks were thick with black sludge. As with the house, all this was rather different from the Kentish village and the soft, green countryside we had left behind!

Having got over my initial homesickness and the strangeness of the surroundings and so on, I settled down into my new life. I was well looked after by the Jones's, although it was nothing like being at home with my mother and father, of course. As we got to know the area we found that much of the surrounding countryside away from the pits and coal tips was really quite lovely, but in a rather different way from the fields, hills and woods at home. I am sure that it was here that my affection for the more rugged sort of countryside was born. In the meantime, my parents were also forced to undergo some changes, again the result of evacuation. By September, 1940, Dover had become quite untenable for local industry. My father worked at Buckland Paper Mill, owned by Wiggins Teape, and he and the rest of the workforce were redeployed all over England, Scotland and Wales to other paper mills. Dad was sent to Overton Paper Mill in Hampshire, where they made currency paper. My mother went with him, of course, and she was able to pay me several visits while I was at Aberbargoed. So "home" was now Overton and was to remain so for some years! Initially, my parents lived in one room in a house in Overton; they tried to find a place of their own but had no luck.

My cousins Colin and Jean were billeted about half a mile away from me in opposite directions so they were about a mile or so from each other. Colin and I, being boys, had more in common with each other and so I saw more of Colin than I did of Jean who, in any case, went back to River sometime in late 1940 or early 1941. I also had other school friends from River who I used to go about with and made new friends from the local boys and girls. And so my new life went on.

My cousin Keith had been evacuated with Dover County School to Ebbw Vale, which is to the north of Aberbargoed, at the head of the Ebbw valley. Some time in the first part of 1941 I learned that I had been accepted for Dover County School and, together with Colin, was to start there in September 1941. Another upheaval! Of course, this meant leaving the Jones's and then being billeted with someone else in Ebbw Vale. Colin and Keith's father had been redeployed to a paper mill at St Neots, in what was then Huntingdonshire, and lived in a village called Eaton Socon, not too far from St Neots. My uncle and aunt were fortunate enough to have got a house of their own to live in; they also had my grandmother living with them - her house, just along the road from ours in River, had been demolished by a German shell in August 1940 (fired from one of the large-calibre naval guns the Germans had installed on the French coast in the Cap Gris Nez area). And so it was that at the end of my time in Aberbargoed my parents and I went to Eaton Socon for a week and then we went on to Overton in Hampshire until it was time for my mother to take me to Ebbw Vale, a thriving steel town, the foundries etc being owned by Richard Thomas and Baldwin. When we got there, we met the headmaster of my new school who told us that the Billetting Officer had arranged for me to be billeted on a Mr and Mrs Lewis. This was quite different from the Jones's. The Lewis's didn't have any children of their own and lived in a pleasant but small terraced house owned by the Duke of Beaufort. There was only gas lighting downstairs and none at all upstairs, so we had to take a candle upstairs when going to bed at night; a torch was useful! Mr Lewis did labouring type work connected with new electricity pylons over the moors near Beaufort, Brynmawr and further east, as I remember it.

My new school was just up the road from the Lewis's and we shared it on a shift basis with the Ebbw Vale County Secondary School. Morning shift was 8 am to 1pm, afternoon 1pm to 6pm and school dinners were awful - quite the worst I ever came across. And so really 'serious' schooling began. The shift system enabled us to retain our school identity - we had one shift, and the Ebbw Vale students had the other, and the next week we would swap shifts. Sport was well organised and I played soccer from the beginning. We were introduced for the first time to rugby (soccer being regarded locally as being 'cissy'), but I didn't like it at all and managed to avoid playing it most of the time! Later on, I found that I had rather a natural inclination for cricket and that became my favourite summer game. There was intense rivalry between the locals and the evacuees, mainly in the area of sporting activities.

The shift system obviously created considerable problems for both schools and within a year or so another building was found for the bottom four or five forms of our school to use - I think the sixth form remained at the Ebbw Vale school premises because of its need for access to laboratories etc. Our new "school" was, in fact, a large old house called "Pentwyn House" at the far end of the town, so I had quite a long walk to and from school each day, which I am sure did me no harm at all. In particular, I remember the toilet facilities at Pentwyn House being totally inadequate for so many of us - they were filthy. Of considerable importance to us was the fact that we at last got rid of those dreadful school dinners, now being marched in two sittings to the local British Restaurant each day, which was a considerable improvement. When we had practical chemistry or physics lessons we sometimes went in a big 'crocodile' the length of the town to the Ebbw Vale school laboratories. Pentwyn House stood in its own grounds and we were able to use them as a play area at break times. A number of us spent some of our leisure time in the evenings at the local Working Men's Club, where we could look at the papers or play billiards or snooker if there was a table to spare and we had the necessary penny or two for half an hour or an hour on a table. Other time was spent playing football or cricket, going to the local 'park', going to the cinema (if we had the money - there were three cinemas in

the town), wandering around, sometimes, I am sure, making a nuisance of ourselves to someone! I became 12 and then 13 and at the same time aware of the existence of girls so not all spare time was spent at the Working Men's Club etc!

School holidays were looked forward to with great anticipation for this meant going "home", wherever that was. For me it was with my parents at Overton. This meant getting the money sent to me for the railway fare, buying a ticket to Basingstoke the day before I was going to travel, and then catching the 7.02am train from Ebbw Vale to Newport, followed by the 8.37am train to Reading, where my mother met me; we then caught a local train to Basingstoke where we got a 'bus to Overton. My school holidays at Overton bring back very pleasant memories. I was given my first (second-hand) bicycle and my father and I became very familiar with all of the surrounding countryside going for 30 or 40 mile 'cycle rides along almost traffic-free roads. Traffic consisted mainly of very long Army convoys, including tanks, which are quite intimidating to 'cyclists - we often couldn't see anyone aboard the tanks, the drivers looking through small slits in the bodywork, and we felt rather uneasy about this great metal monster bearing down on us from the rear apparently with nobody in control of it! Private cars were virtually non-existent. We also went for many walks - picking primroses in the woods, bagful after bagful of field mushrooms in the fields in the late summer and autumn and pounds of blackberries to be made into jam and pies with hoarded sugar at about the same time. In addition to all this I made several friends from the local boys (and girls!) and would look forward to seeing them as the holidays came along.

Sometime in 1942 or 1943 the Lewis's decided that they had had enough of evacuees and another billet was found for me in another part of Ebbw Vale much closer to Pentwyn House; my new foster-parents were Mr and Miss Edwards, a brother and sister. I stayed with them for the rest of the time we were in Ebbw Vale apart from 6 weeks or so when Miss Edwards was quite ill with a 'quinsey' throat. Until she was better I had to go and stay in a hostel at the southern end of the town in a village called Waunlwydd, near Cwm, where the steelworks finished and the pits began. As far as I could judge, the hostel, which I

think was a disused school, was a tiny part of the site of the Garden Festival laid out there in the 1990's.

We followed the course of the war with perhaps more interest than other youngsters since the sooner it ended the sooner we would get home to our parents for good. So we listened to all of the news bulletins. Then came that fateful day - 6th June 1944 - D-Day. There was a radio in the British Restaurant and this was always on for the 1 o'clock news while we were eating our dinners. On D-Day there were two local workmen sitting at a table eating their dinners amongst all of us boys and they were talking to each other very loudly when the news came on. I can remember quite clearly one of our masters telling them in no uncertain terms to 'shut up' so we could listen to the first reports about the landings in Normandy. You could have heard a pin drop! We hung on to every word. As the days and weeks went on it seemed that there was daylight at the end of the tunnel at last. Then came the news that the Canadians had cleared the Germans from the channel ports from where the Germans had been shelling Dover with large calibre naval guns, and we were told that we would be going back home to Dover in December 1944. I was almost 15.

This presented another little problem for my parents since my father had not heard anything about his work returning to Dover. So there was a different separation - Mum moved back to River to look after me and Dad had to stay in Overton until Wiggins Teape reopened in Dover later in 1945; he came home at week-ends.

It was a strange feeling to return home after all that time. Amongst other things everything seemed to be so much smaller than I remembered it. We were lucky that our house had suffered no more than the windows being broken once or twice by blast from German shells which had burst close-by. Our school had been requisitioned by the Navy, was full of WRNS (Women's Royal Naval Service) and called HMS (His Majesty's Ship) something- or- another. So we started back to school in a motley collection of buildings in several parts of what was a shell- and bomb-scarred town. I think we finally set foot in our school later in 1945. So we were finally back home again in all respects.