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The Lighthorne Evacuation Experience

by David Amery (2011)

Lighthorne 1940 - 41



*Mr & Mrs Camm in front of 11 The Bank, Lighthorne
with evacuees Peter Amery (10) and brother David (8)*

Toby, the dog, can just be seen

Foreward

We are talking of events that happened 71 years ago, so if my memory is a little hazy in parts, please forgive me.

My elder brother, Peter, and I lived at 22 Caludon Road, Stoke, Coventry. Near the bottom of the road there was a railway line serving the armaments factory in Red Lane, with a network of canals alongside. Coventry was known to be the centre of the war effort with companies such as Daimler, Dunlop, GEC, Humber and Armstrong Whitworth all contributing to the war effort.

The first air raid on Coventry was a small one, in June 1940, but it caused the mass evacuation of school children to the country. Pupils at Stoke Council School were sent to the Long Itchington area. For many villagers the concept of forcing town kids on families was not a happy one and many were soon returned to Coventry when things appeared to quieten down.

A false dawn! November saw the notorious "Blitz", which destroyed our home. We fled from our garden air raid shelter to nearby Aunt Nancy for the rest of the night. She had a niece who lived in Old School Lane, Lighthorne, and we were shipped there the following day. We stayed one night, sleeping on the floor. The following morning a Mr and Mrs Camm volunteered to take us on board. They proved to be superb people and their hospitality was second to none. Their only son Bert was in the army, away in the Middle East, as an ambulance driver. Also they had a lovely black haired dog called Toby.

Mrs Camm was the church organist and Mr Camm the lead bass singer in the church choir. The Rev Collier was the vicar. As a result, Peter and I became choir boys, joined by a local, George Smith. We were a natural group at Christmas time as The Three Kings – myrrhh was my gift. We sang at weddings, funerals and festivals and were rewarded with a sixpence. This money was put into an account and surrendered when we finally left the village.

At Christmas, Mr Verney drove us round the big houses carol singing at night, crammed into an Austin 10 car with dimmed headlights, so where we went was all a mystery. We did get as far as Compton Verney, where we sang to recuperating injured airmen. Which of the Verney dynasty he was is not known. He lived in a big house next to the malthouse by the village green. [Bishops Farmhouse -ed.]

The Bank

Walking up The Bank, the small field on the left was where I saw the first concept of “wheelie bins”. All the residents of The Bank would bring their cans, bottles, paper, cardboard, etc., and place them separately in large containers for collection later. You will notice no mention of foodstuffs, as this surplus was stored elsewhere to feed pigs, chickens and the like. (See later.)

Mr and Mrs Camm lived at number 11 The Bank, in a line of 12 cottages divided in the middle by a toilet block. [Bank Cottages – ed.] The accommodation comprised a living room, a pantry and a kitchen – no back door, as the building backed onto a bank. Upstairs there was a large landing on which we slept and the Camm’s main bedroom. There was no running water and my brother and I would fetch a day’s supply, in two buckets, from the wells at the bottom of the village. As we became more proficient we were allowed to use a yoke, carrying two buckets at a time. To go to the toilet we went along the front of the four cottages to the toilet block, with our key. Toilets were rudimentary, comprising a bucket and a plank of wood with the necessary hole. When full, buckets were emptied in our allotted part of the field behind the cottages and buried. Bath time was on feast days, in a shared galvanised bath, in front of the fire, much to the irritation of Toby, the displaced dog.

The Camm’s philosophy was “ Fresh air and fun”, so we were encouraged to go out and play in all weathers, in the woods and fields and, in particular, to help the farmers in the fields by doing menial jobs, to help the war effort. At the same time we made friends with the local billeted prisoners of war, who rewarded us with some of their extra rations to take back to the Camms.

The Camms taught us to play the piano and sing to entertain our mother on her fortnightly visit. Mum would arrive on a Saturday lunch time at the Chesterton T junction, on a Bunty bus, which toured the villages delivering parents. There she was met by delighted children and we walked the one mile back to the village, telling her of all the exciting events of the past fortnight. She would stay overnight and go back on Sunday evening. She always went back to Coventry laden with food goodies.

Even out in the country at Lighthorne we could see the glow in the sky from the fires still burning in Coventry. We experienced the occasional

German bomber flying overhead, one of which jettisoned its bombs before crashing. One bomb landed and exploded in the field immediately behind The Bank. In the morning we all rushed out to see the crater but the cows had got there before us and were surrounding the crater looking into it.

School

School was run by two spinster sisters of the parish, the Misses Carpenter. There were two classrooms and therefore only two classes at a time, comprising the "Big Uns" and the "Little Uns". There was a variety of ages and aptitudes in each class (mixed ability). So if the class did arithmetic, we all did arithmetic. If the subject was knitting, we all did knitting.

Food was delivered to the school at lunch time and then we were allowed out to get some fresh air and play, also I suspect to give the teachers a rest. The only break in their duties was when the Reverend Collier came for his weekly visit. For us adventurous boys it meant roaming the surrounding countryside, building dens, watching wildlife, climbing haystacks and so on, to be recalled from far afield by the impatient teachers beating out the signal on a dustbin lid in order to reach our distant ears. There was another teacher to augment the Carpenters, Miss Clutterbook, who cycled each day from some distant village, come rain or shine.

The Carpenter sisters were also hosts to two evacuees from Coventry, namely Nona Stevens and Valerie Brickwood. We tended to bond together. Our relationships with the local children were on the whole great and many good friendships were made. Interestingly all four of us evacuees, educated by the Carpenters, went on to grammar schools in Coventry. My brother, Peter, was the first to go, qualifying to go to Bablake, only to be evacuated immediately to Lincoln, together with his new school intake. Interestingly the German prisoners of war used us children to coach them in the English language.

The Green

It must be remembered all those years ago there were very few cars about. There were only two or three car owners in the village. The horse was the main form of power on the farms. One of the exciting sights was to watch at the blacksmiths these huge carthorses being shod and

experience the pungent smell as red hot iron shoes were burnt onto the hooves.

Harvest time was almost a festival in each village in turn, as great steam driven traction engines toured the individual farms, towing behind them the threshing machines - the latter being energised by a big leather pulley belt from the traction engine's flywheel. Everyone who could, helped. Examples of produce from the gardens and allotments were put on show at the Harvest Festival, as the villagers gave thanks in a packed church, for a successful harvest.

Earlier there was mention of saving discarded food for feeding to animals. Pigs were a great source of food so all the village contributed. When a sow gave birth, each new piglet had to be registered with the Ministry of Food. Strange to relate, there was always one that "died at birth" or somehow got overlooked. The reward for this ruse was that the unregistered pig, when fed on our scraps and fully grown, was slaughtered and divided among its food contributors. The message would go round the village that "tonight was the night" of the slaughter and dividends could be collected in Post Office Lane. It was raining and gutters began to stream with blood as I saw a police car approaching from down the hill opposite. Rushing up the lane I shouted a warning, only to be told that the police had come for their cut. There was often a tressle table on the village green where anyone with an excess of vegetables, fruit or food of any kind would put it on display for people to take home for free.

Gaydon was an airfield from which the huge Flying Fortress, manned by Americans, set off to bomb German targets. The Malthouse was the social centre of the village and dances were held there at which American airmen regularly attended. One such dance occurred when Mum was visiting and we were taken along. Mum was a lovely dancer and had a great time as we listened to American themed music for the first time. It was not Mr and Mrs Camm's scene however. The Antelope pub remained open, with the Tarvers as mine hosts. The Americans were very hospitable and at Christmas collected the children from the surrounding villages and gave them a great party over at Gaydon. It was there that I saw my first movie, in black and white of course, and featuring Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, etc. Amazingly we came home chewing gum. If a Flying Fortress, returning from a bombing mission, crashed in a field, all the kids would rush to the site next morning, hoping to be able to collect a souvenir, but guards would get there first.

Sport

There was a cricket team, but it is hard to recall if we played soccer. Was it invented then? Activities were mainly of the open air kind, playing along the Washbrook, making dams, bird watching, building dens, tree climbing and the like. We were given sandwiches and a bottle of water and were away from base almost all of the day until hunger called. Wonderful!

In the winter there was sledging – most exciting. The Washbrook fed its floodplane, which then froze over and created the most wonderful skating rink that you could ever imagine. All the village youths, grown-ups too, would participate in competition for the most turns, the Granny, the furthest and so on.

To be expected there was always a slight frisson between the local boys and the intruders, but it always ended in smiles. They were the locals and they knew and could show us round their territory: where were the best trees to climb, where could you always see kingfishers, where were the best wild mushrooms to be found, etc.

Conclusion

Many decades later a student from Liverpool University, working on his thesis, interviewed my brother and me separately about our experiences on being evacuated and being taken away from home. My elder brother said it was a worrying time as he was the senior and had to look after me. My response “It was the time of my life and gave me forever the love of the countryside.” Q.E.D.

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