

EVACUATION SEPTEMBER 1st 1939

My name is Victor Simon, I attended Central Park Junior School East Ham. On Monday 28th August 1939, the last week of the Summer holiday, all children registered for evacuation were asked to attend school in preparation for evacuation. We were told to come equipped with luggage, for the journey. This consisted of a change of clothing, night wear, slippers and toilet needs etc., together with our sandwiches and gas masks. My brother Ken (aged 8) and I (aged 10), did this for the next three days. Each day, we were sent home, at midday. On Friday 1st September, as if by telepathy, our mothers came with us to school, sensing that this was the day!

We were assembled into a crocodile and marched off to the local underground station, Upton Park. We travelled to Ealing Broadway where we met up with many more children and teachers from other schools. We then boarded an extremely long GWR train. The journey was very slow, and most of us were feeling bewildered and upset, as we were missing our parents, and we had no idea where we were going.

Eventually the train pulled into Uffington station about mid afternoon. As the train was so long, it stopped to allow half the children off and then moved forward to let the remainder off. In the large car park, a fleet of coaches was lined up and the different schools went off to their allocated reception areas.

We arrived in Shrivenham, a place none of us had heard of before, and were taken to The Memorial Hall. I well remember seeing a large number of people there, mainly ladies. Our teachers sat us on the rows of chairs down the hall. It so happened that my brother was sitting in the row just in front of me. Then a lady, came up to my brother and said "Would you like to come and live with me"? I remember his shy reply was "Yes". She then asked if he had a brother or sister, he then pointed at me and the lady, who was Miss Dike, said "Come along with me" We followed her and, to our surprise, she led us to a car, and said to us "Jump in". The reason for our surprise was that our father did not own a car, so this was quite a novelty to us.

We were driven down the village to a shop and we learned that Miss Dike was the owner. She sat us down and then gave us each a postcard and suggested that we write to our parents to tell them where we were and that we had arrived safely. After a drink and biscuit she put us back in the car and drove to Bourton to deliver some groceries. When we returned we were shown our bedroom, and we sorted out our belongings. After we had unpacked, and sorted things out, we went down and did some exploring. Soon afterwards, our Headmaster popped in to see that we had settled in.

We were introduced to Bill Dike, Miss Dike's brother, who was a postman, and we met her father Tom Dike. Also in the shop was Mr Moon (Stan) who lived up the village, and did all sorts of odd jobs in the shop. Stan had been in The Buffs regiment in the Great War and, as he was very badly wounded in the trenches, he walked with a stick. But despite that, he was a very jovial and kind person. The last person in the shop was Kath Forty. She served in the shop and performed many other duties. Kath lived up Stallpits Road with her father and young brother.

The following day being Saturday, my brother and I explored the village. This was all very new to us as we had never visited the country before.

The next day, September 3rd, we came down to breakfast and, Mr Dike, Miss Dike, Bill Dike, Stan Moon and Kath Forty were all sat down. They all looked very solemn and we two boys could not understand why. Just before 11 o'clock the radio was switched on and we heard Mr Chamberlain announcing that we were at war with Germany. Everyone sat looking stunned by the news. Kath began to weep because she realised that her young man would be called up into the forces. My brother and I realised, after listening to the adults, that we would be staying in Shrivenham for some time. After the announcement had been digested, there was much discussion about what was going to happen and how soon it would be. My brother and I had very little to say, as we were really too young to understand how serious things would be for us. For the rest of the day there was a very subdued atmosphere.

On Monday all the evacuees assembled in the village school and we were told that the local children would be in school in the mornings and we would be there in the afternoons. This arrangement was a temporary measure while things were sorted out. We were there for a couple of weeks. And then we moved to the Memorial Hall. There was ample room in the hall and, once we had settled in, school carried on as normally as possible..

There was a certain degree of animosity towards us from the village children, but fortunately it did not cause too many problems. As my brother and I lived in the village store, we soon became well known to many of the local people. Mr Dike was the carpenter, undertaker, plumber, church warden, bell ringer etc., he also sang in St Andrews choir. As we two had also sung in a choir at home, we were soon recruited by Mr Dike and so got to know more of the local lads quite well. We soon got to know many of the adults who came into the shop. I quickly began to feel part of the village community, but I was not so sure about my brother. I also started to help round the shop and often served if the shop was busy.

I am sure that the main reason why we both felt so settled and happy was the way we were treated by Miss Dike, Mr Dike, Bill Dike and Mr Moon. They were all very kind to us and made us feel very much at home. Actually Miss Dike spoilt the two of us in all sorts of ways. and, no doubt, because we became part of the shop, we seem to have been accepted as part of the village community. I know that a number of our fellow Londoners did not fit in with their foster parents. Whether it was the fault of the evacees or vice-versa I am not sure. Some of my fellow evacees were not too pleasant and some of the foster parents resented having to take in these "Londoners", so I think the problem was about 50/50.

Things went along quite smoothly and we settled down to our schoolwork, the weather was very pleasant and, generally, everything was going well. There was one rather amusing incident towards the end of September. The horsechestnut trees in the Rec, of course, produce large numbers of conkers, so one afternoon, we were enjoying the usual conker games when, for some reason, there was a confrontation with the local lads. This led to a conker fight, fortunately no-one was hurt. but Mr Dance, the village Headmaster, was extremely angry, and he organised a number of men with carts to remove all the conkers and dump them some distance away. All the lads were highly amused. It was rather interesting that from then onwards relations between us were greatly improved.

Two weeks after we were evacuated our parents made their first visit. They took to Miss Dike immediately, and so they were reassured that we were in good hands.. We showed them round the village and they thought it seemed a very pleasant place. They came down to see us regularly and were always given a warm welcome by Miss Dike and all the others.

Things went very well for us and I felt very much part of the community, although my brother did not settle in the same way, after all he was only just turned seven. We both enjoyed singing in the choir at morning and evening services. The evening service was earlier than usual as it was not possible to blackout the church. We enjoyed choir practice and, at times, we were rather naughty. Miss Childs was the organist and choir mistress. We had to take it in turns to pump the organ and sometimes, as a joke, the boy on duty would stop pumping and allow the organ to wheeze to a halt. Miss Childs was not amused. Of course, we never did this during a service!

We were often taken into Swindon at the week-end and enjoyed going round the shops. It felt strange, walking round a town, which was a so much smaller than our home town. The atmosphere was completely different., Looking back on it now, Swindon had a much friendlier feeling somehow.

One presence I have not mentioned was Miss Dike's dog Tim. a lively terrier. One thing I remember about him. was his love of the car. It was his territory and if anyone tried to enter the car, without Miss Dike being present he became very aggressive. Other than that, he was very well behaved and friendly.

Time passed, Christmas came along and it was good to have our parents with us. I think they were in two minds whether to take us back home with them. There had been few signs of war and quite a number of evacuees had returned to London. Our parents decided to let us remain in Shrivenham. We celebrated the new year and our parents went home. The next notable date was January 8th, this was the begining of rationing. This caused much extra work in the shop .I learnt how to make up all kinds of orders so that everbody received their correct rations. I very much enjoyed weighing up sugar and making up the butter ration, from a 56lb block The biggest job for Miss Dike was sorting out all the ration books. This was a job for her on Sundays as well as evenings during the week

Suddenly the war took on a more threatening dimension, Denmark and Norway were invaded and then France was overwhelmed. This led to the Dunkirk evacuation which involved Shrivenham because many soldiers were brought to the local barracks. They were often seen sitting along the raised pavement opposite the shop, looking very weary and disheartened. As they no duties to perform, they were at a loose end and they just waited until the pubs opened. We children were interested in talking to them, but they did not talk about what they had been through. They stayed around for a few weeks and then they disappeared.

We knew nothing about the Battle of Britain, in fact, except for all the soldiers and the the rationing the war seemed far away. We did have one reminder though. One afternoon, sometime in August, a Junkers 88 dropped a few bombs near Watchfield airfield. Meanwhile, London was still quiet and so my parents decided to take us home. On Saturday August 18th, we went back to East Ham. We had only been home. few days when a few bombs were dropped on London.. In reply, a number of our bombers retaliated on Berlin.

This led to Saturday 7th September. At about teatime, four or five hundred German bombers raided the docks, only a mile or so from us, they set them alight and then they returned in the evening, guided by the fires. As the raids were repeated every night after that, my parents decided to send us back to Shrivenham. Fortunately Miss Dike was pleased to see us back and so we carried on where we left off.. We were soon back to normal in the village. I had become very fond of Shrivenham and I felt completely at home. London seemed a long way away, so noisy and hemmed in compared with the village.

Life went on as if we had not been away, I enjoyed doing odd jobs round the shop and serving on occasion. Miss Dike's sister, Win, had left service, up north, and had come back to live in Shrivenham. She was a wonderful cook and produced excellent meals, in spite of rationing. My brother and I were back in the church choir and back to school.

We did have a very unpleasant reminder of the war on the night of November 14th. That evening we heard the air raid warning and there was the sound of many aircraft overhead We could see them silhouetted in the moonlight and realised they were German bombers. As we learnt later, this was the terrible raid on Coventry.

Christmas came and was enjoyed by all then it was announced that Miss Dike and Mr Moon were to marry. This was not unexpected, and everyone was very pleased to hear the news. The wedding was on January 2nd 1941, at St Andrews. Win Dike was bridesmaid and Stan Moon's brother was best man. The Reverend C. G. Seymour-Metford conducted the ceremony, with Miss Childs at the organ plus the choir. The service was followed by a reception at the Memorial Hall after which Mr and Mrs Moon went off to High Wycombe where they spent their honeymoon..

One of our favourite pastimes was walking across the fields to Watchfield aerodrome, plane spotting. This was a Training Command station, with three main types (Tiger Moth, Airspeed Oxford and Avro Anson). The airfield was always very busy and there were visiting aircraft, of varied types, as well as those actually stationed there. Another of our pastimes was playing by a small stream near the airfield. We fished for tiddlers and sticklebacks and built dams in the stream. Although we all missed our parents, nearly all of us thoroughly enjoyed the freedom to do things we had been unable do back home. I must admit that I was so happy in Shrivenham that I could have lived there permanently.

In 1942, the American army arrived and they brought a different culture to the village. I think the villagers, as a whole, did not know what to make of them. We found that they wished to be accepted, but like we evacuees, they were in a strange country and far from home. Once we got to know them, they soon settled down although we found them flamboyant and rather overpowering. We children had a good time as they were very generous with their chewing gum and Hershey chocolate bars. They played baseball on the Rec and we sometimes had a go. We pulled their legs, as we told them that in England, only the girls played rounders.

By the Summer of 1942 there was very little bombing in London and our parents thought it time we came home so, sadly that was the end of our evacuation. We bid a sad farewell to all our friends in Shrivenham and went back home.

Among the family names, I recall, were Dance, Day, Judd and Knapp. Also there was Lady Gifford and her daughter, Colonel College and his wife and also Mr and Mrs Parsons, who lived in the old Manor House. I am afraid that, as it is so long ago, I cannot remember any others. After all it was Seventy years ago!

Finally, I must admit that I would loved to have stayed in Shrivenham as I was so happy there , but I am not sure that I would like to live there now. It does not look nor feel the same village I that knew all those years ago. I have not deserted this area. My Wife and I have lived in Swindon for fifty years now, fortunately on the very pleasant Covingham estate and we are happy there. But again Swindon is not the town I knew seventy years ago. It has become much too big and impersonal.

Vic Simon, September 2009