

EVACUEES

On the afternoon of Friday September 1st 1939 twenty-five London Primary School children and Miss Blackie, their teacher, arrived at the village hall in Branscombe. They travelled to Branscombe via Waterloo and Honiton, a small part of Operation Pied Piper, the government's massive secret plan to evacuate children from large urban areas to safer rural locations in the face of the anticipated war with Germany. The children must have arrived in Branscombe at the end of the longest journey most of them had ever experienced - bewildered, tired, hungry and unaware of the upheavals to come.

In the village hall they were welcomed, offered refreshments and introduced to their hosts who may have selected them on the basis of 'I'll take that one'. The evacuees were from Archbishop Tenison School Lambeth and they were about to enter a new rural world of farms, thatched cottages, cows, hens, green fields, woods and bucket toilets - very different sights, sounds and smells from those familiar in distant Lambeth. A few of the evacuees found these new surroundings so upsetting that they were quite unable to settle down and had to return to London. But the kindness and goodwill of their hosts, teachers and others helped many of them to settle successfully and for some, Branscombe became a rural paradise. Miss Blackie played an important part in these successes. A respected teacher, she was able to give the evacuees much needed comfort and support in their new surroundings. She also became friendly with my parents and when she left for another post in March 1942 the school log book shows that the pupils and staff presented her with a book token and their good wishes. I understand that she was the sister of Dr Robert Churchill Blackie, Curator of the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter, for about 35 years until his retirement in 1968.

At Branscombe school the new arrivals pushed the roll up from about fifty to over eighty because in addition to the twenty-five official evacuees there were seven private ones - again from London. Despite the increased pressure of numbers on the fragile sanitary and water supply arrangements at the school, the Autumn term of 1939 started well on the morning of Monday September 11th. The start had been delayed for a week due to the declaration of war on September 3rd. Fortunately the school had a spare classroom, so in the early days of the war it was possible for Miss Blackie to teach the evacuees as a group. On October 5th the headmistress of Archbishop Tenison Girls' School and the Rector and Curate of Lambeth parish visited the evacuees. The visitors reported that they were pleased with the appearance and surroundings of the children and the way they had settled down in the school

and the parish - confirmation that a good start had been made. When the first term of the war ended on December 21st the evacuees took part in party games and dancing. Each child received an orange and the log book records "relations between all concerned have been most cordial".

It is worth noting that the drift of evacuees back to London from Devon as a whole was below the national average. However, during the course of the war there were variations in the number of evacuees on the school roll. In late 1939 and early 1940 the expected air raids on London did not take place and some children drifted back but the blitz sent them back to Devon again. In April 1941 the school roll reached 100 - 54 evacuees and 46 Devon children and I was aware of a new atmosphere in the playground. Morning playtimes and afternoon breaks became more crowded. There were so many new faces and at times the playground was noisier and somewhat rougher, with less space for the traditional games of the Branscombe children, while new ones were brought in by the evacuees. Amid all this activity the playground became the place where new friendships were formed.

At Branscombe and elsewhere the coming and going of pupils and staff through the war made it difficult to maintain uninterrupted schooling but efforts were made to ensure that the plans worked and that children coming in were successfully absorbed into school classes. The final influx of new pupils took place on July 17th 1944 when thirty-six evacuees arrived from Brixton without an accompanying teacher. They were escaping from Hitler's secret weapon, the Flying Bomb, but the launch sites in Northern Germany were soon destroyed by the advancing allies. Within a year the war in Europe was over and on June 25th 1945 the last of the July 17th 1944 evacuees left, followed three days later by the last two of the September 1st 1939 children. The school roll then returned to its pre-war level.

From the details in the school log book we know something of the experiences of the evacuees while they were in the village. Soon after arrival they had to struggle through the coldest winter for 45 years - an aspect of what is now known as the early 1940s global climate anomaly. Unsurprisingly, school attendance suffered during the long snowy periods and hard frosts of January and February 1940. In addition to the snow, those who did get through encountered bitter winds and icy roads. I remember children arriving after long, miserable walks from remote billets in cold wet clothes and footwear which were dried, as far as possible, on the guard rails surrounding the two old black Victorian Tortoise coke burning stoves - the only sources of heating. The hazardous conditions on Branscombe's steep hills and narrow,

twisting roads made fuel deliveries difficult and there was a sense of relief when Bradford's lorry driver was able to deliver supplies for the stoves in late February - just in time..... no doubt his lorry had heavy chains on its wheels. Testing winter conditions were also experienced in January and February 1941 and in other winters during the 1940s.

In school the evacuees went through frequent gas mask drills, air raid drills, fire drills and stirrup pump practice. There were numerous visits from inspectors - Devon county and LCC. The children were examined by the school medical officer, the school dentist (Mr Dredge), the optician and the school nurse, who was concerned about nits and general cleanliness. They were all immunised against diphtheria and given advice about what to do if an air raid occurred on the way to or from school - go to the nearest house - and in school they practised sheltering under desks immediately the siren sounded. From July 1940 the windows were pasted with muslin as a protection against splinters of glass. As the war intensified there was always a fear that Branscombe would be deliberately bombed because there was a munitions factory in the village, but mercifully we were not targeted. On January 18th 1941 there was a visit from Canon A Llewellyn Jones Rector of Lambeth who expressed his pleasure at the general appearance and welfare of the children. Rev. WH Raymer, vicar of Branscombe, became a frequent visitor, checking the registers and our religious knowledge. The Chief Air Raid Warden, Mr TE Lloyd, often appeared with his gas mask in a cardboard box dangling on a long string slung round his neck.... I recall a 'Dads Army' image - he was a very tall man. School managers came to sign the attendance registers and the attendance officer came to look into unexplained absences - many visitors came through the school doors. The radio was another link with the outside world. Given to the school by an anonymous donor in May 1940 and kept in a locked cabinet it provided a regular Friday morning service, music and movement classes and information on the progress of the war. As a Branscombe pupil at the time I remember that the radio broadcasts were among the highlights of the week. Log book entries also show that despite difficulties there was a constant effort to provide free milk for the children under the Milk in Schools Scheme. All of this points to concern about the health and welfare of children, with many professionals involved. There is an argument that this wartime experience across the country was central to post war reforms in child care and welfare.

During the school holidays the evacuees made contributions to the war effort. In the fields they pulled ragwort and charlock - weeds which reduced the yield of arable crops. They picked and dried plantain leaves which were used for medical purposes, cleared bracken and nettles and destroyed

cabbage white butterflies. Firewood was gathered and sold for Red Cross funds and in August 1940 the children were given instructions about sewing and knitting squares to make blankets for the Red Cross. Some evacuees were regularly employed collecting cardboard and newspaper for the war effort. Photographs from the time show that collectors moved through the village picking up and carting the salvage to a collection point where the children and adult helpers sorted it out and packed it up. All in all, they made a considerable contribution to the life and war effort of Branscombe and it can be argued that children's wartime work was important at the national level.

All this wartime activity in the village and school was supported by some very inadequate public services. Branscombe as a whole had particular problems of sanitation and water supply and the Local Education Authority had questions about this issue in 1937. Ever since the school began in 1878 the water supply had come from a frost-prone hand pump situated outside the back door of the adjoining schoolhouse. By 1937 it was known that this water was unfit for drinking due to the presence of dangerous coliform bacteria and the only alternative supply was a shute some way down the road beyond the Post Office. This meant that water had to be carried up to the school from the shute - not an easy task, especially when the number of pupils reached 100. In the summer of 1943 the medical authorities conducted further tests on the water in the well which supplied the schoolhouse hand pump and in September of that year we were told that the water from the pump was safe to drink provided 10 drops of Milton were added to each pint of water. The result was chlorinated water with a horrible taste - which could only be removed by the addition of another chemical called 'hypo', a photographic fixer - Awful! - and it was so difficult to get the proportions right. A further complication arose from the tendency of the pump to freeze solid during the severe winters of the 1940s. We attempted to get round this by wrapping up the pump in layers of sacking held in place by long spirals of string to keep out the frost. However, at times during periods of severe frost, the pump and even the pipe leading to it from the well froze and it all had to be thawed out, usually with the assistance of Harry Layzell, the village blacksmith.

In 1938 the authorities stated that the primitive, unhygienic and smelly bucket toilet arrangement at the school was a danger to the health of pupils and a threat to the well of Mr Gush, a neighbour. This alert emphasised the inevitable link between poor sanitation, polluted water and the risk to human health at the school, a risk which increased when the number of children on roll rose. Urgent action was called for and eventually an answer of sorts was

found by the school managers. It would be better not to go into detail about this scheme but it lasted throughout and beyond the war and buckets were in use until the late 1950s, when the crucial and revolutionary development came in the form of a modern sewerage and water supply system for the whole village. In January 1956 electricity reached the school and in 1958 flush toilets replaced bucket toilets for the children and a staff toilet and wash basins were installed..... At about this time the school had its first telephone connection. It is interesting to note that electricity had arrived at the schoolhouse just before the Second World War and the schoolhouse had a telephone from 1949. Again, it can be said that the presence of the evacuees and their increased pressure on water and sanitation arrangements at the school drew the attention of the authorities to the urgent need for improvement, but the essential public infrastructure investment did not take place until the late 1950s - well after the evacuees returned to London and I had left Branscombe.

For more about evacuees in Devon see Susan J.Hess: 'Civilian Evacuation to Devon in the Second World War' (Ph.D.Thesis 2006)

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