

Evacuation – Living with Relatives



About one in ten evacuees were 'private', and went to live with relatives, often grandparents known and loved, sometimes more distant relatives they'd never met before. In this lithograph by Ethel Leontine Gabain, Mrs Norris provides tea in her Cookham cottage.

I came to Perth when I was seven to my grandparents in the spring of 1944, to a flat with only cold water and an outside loo for eight families. My mother took me up on the train and I didn't realise I was being left. I didn't see my mother for over three years.

Not every evacuee went to complete strangers. Parents who had relatives in the country would often send their children away to live with them, and their mothers would sometimes accompany them. Occasionally a mother would take a child with her when she was evacuated to war work, such as at a munitions factory sited well away from London. The girl at the head of the chapter, whose mother left her in Perth for several years, goes on to describe life in Scotland.

I missed my mother at night, but I loved my grandmother, who was protective and placid, so good-natured. My grandfather was crabby, self-centred, sitting listening to the radio. Scotland was terribly dull with no bombing. At school the teachers were spinsters, strict and rigid, and hit you on the hand with a belt. One boy grabbed the belt and pushed the teacher, so became an instant hero, but he left the school straight away. The kids imitated my accent and called me an English pig-dog. Eventually my father came up and got a job with a dry cleaner's, my mother worked for a seedsman, and we lived as a family again in a prefab, cream with green windows. It had gardens front and back and even a fridge.

In the May of 1940 we went to stay with my father's distant cousins near Melton Mowbray. They were farmers, so we had wonderful food, including Stilton cheese that they made in the village, and were very happy. Our parents visited when they could and the family had two elder daughters who didn't resent us. The weather was glorious, and I remember haymaking in a field with a hay waggon, and sliding down the haystacks. Once I found a tiny round green thing in the road and announced that I'd found doll's cabbage. It was a Brussels sprout.

We went to deepest Wales to my grandparents. Grandpa had worked on the railways, and grandma was Welsh, so they retired there. He spoke hardly any Welsh, and in church on Sundays, when the service was in Welsh and so were the hymns, he would find the English version in *Ancient and Modern* and sing away in English. They admired a good voice, and sometimes the English would have an extra verse, so they waited politely for him to sing it solo.

After the war began, a German Jew named Pickard bought the company my mother worked for and asked her to housekeep their house in Redbourn during the week. I went to the C of E school, a long walk with the boy next door, starting through their garden. I had a lovely time, in just one classroom with a partition across. It always seemed to be summer. We used to cross the road from school to play by the pond, collecting frogspawn and things. The house was owned by people whose daughter took me to the pictures to see *The Reluctant Dragon*. I was petrified of that blue dragon.

My father was an army driver, driving an ammunition truck to and from Yorkshire, and he drove us illegally in his lorry, my grandmother and me. Between him in the driver's seat and us at the back was a three-inch steel plate. We were sat on boxes of TNT and ammunition – 'Don't move!' When we got there I had to be carried out with knees locked solid, into a tiny house, gas downstairs, no light upstairs. Aunt Bess