

Evacuation – To a Strange School



Evacuees often went away with their school to one town, or singly, and would frequently be in a strange school in an unfamiliar rural setting. Here girls from St George's, Battersea, have a sewing class out of doors in Pembrokeshire. Note the girl sewing alone at the back.

The teacher liked my singing, and I, the little Jewish girl, was cast as the Virgin Mary in the nativity play. I had no idea who she was, but perhaps appropriately I had to say 'My spirit is troubled; I am amazed and know not why.' The angel Gabriel appeared when I was putting daffodils into a vase.

Children of primary school age who were evacuated, usually with several of their teachers, tended to go to the school closest to their billet, so could easily lose touch with their friends. As with a new home, a new school was pot luck – some had already learnt way more than their new classmates, some found they were behind. Most secondary schools that were evacuated would share the premises with an equivalent school in the town which now housed them, usually with the evacuated school using the same classrooms at a different time of day.

The village headmaster Mr Ellis was a Londoner and singled me out as the only one who could speak properly (despite my glottal stop and dropped aitches). One day he was particularly contemptuous of a boy who was reading from the Bible: ‘Burr ye woon anoother’s burdens’. ‘Burr? Burr? That’s something that sticks to your clothes when you’re out walking. *Bear, boy. Bear!*’ This was more than the lad could burr, so he waylaid me on the way home, whacked me on the legs with a prickly branch, and threw into the beck the leather satchel my hosts the Cloughs had given me for my birthday. I arrived home in a sorry state, made worse by not being believed by Mrs Clough: ‘Nay, he’s a loovely lad.’

I hated that first school. The teachers were wonderful but the children nasty, with their Scottish accents hard to pick up. I got the strap for being cheeky. Later I went to Perth High School, a new secondary mod, very snazzy, which I loved, the sexes separated and with teachers back from the war.

I was then evacuated with a teacher, Miss Packman, to Kenfyg Hill for two and a half years, and couldn’t have been happier. There were no proper lessons, just rambling and nature study, poetry and songs. Back in London at the age of ten I failed every test – for Geography, Arithmetic, History I got 0/100. I had to do percentages and had no idea what they were.

I was evacuated to Ryde Hall School in Surrey, Ripley, boarding, and I loved it. Lessons were in the morning only, and I learnt to read. I had a child’s under-5 gas mask, but the box disintegrated so I was given a metal one that I couldn’t open. I went nutting for chestnuts in Guildford.

At first we went to a village school in rural Wales, where the lessons were all in Welsh, which I learnt pretty quickly despite the fact that it wasn’t spoken at home by my grandparents. Then I and one other boy – still a good friend – went to the grammar school in Machynlleth, cycling the seven miles each way. Except in winter that is, when we stayed in the town in digs, five to a bed, three at the top and two at the bottom. Yes, it was a big bed. The town was swamped with evacuees, but mostly from Liverpool, so much Scouse was spoken. My Welsh stood me in good stead. When we came back to Wood Green (just in time for the V1s, needless to say) I might have struggled to get a place at Trinity County, but at the interview the Head, suitably a Mr Jones, switched to Welsh when he discovered where I’d been, and I was in.

The school was evacuated later in the war to Queen Elizabeth’s Mansfield. They had lessons in the morning, we in the afternoon. I was driven to school through Sherwood