

JIM HENSMAN

Jim was 6 years old when WW2 broke out and living in London. He was evacuated to Wheathampstead in September 1939 with his sister Eileen, who was 2 years older than him, his aunt who was his father's sister, known as Tattie, and grandmother, who was very ill. His mother stayed with his father who ran a pub in Shoreditch, London.

They first lived in a tiny cottage next to the Lord Nelson pub in Marford Road. No running water, so had to get water from a well in the garden. No electricity, so they used a gas lamp.

Early in 1940 Jim and his sister were evacuated to Welwyn Garden City. They lived in separate houses but in the same road.

During the blitz his father had an accident. He moved to 125 Marford Road to recoup for 6 months. He recovered and heard that the Swan needed a new licensee. The licensee was Mr Wilkinson and the brewery was Benskin's at Watford. He applied not expecting to get it because he was a Londoner. But he did and they moved into the Swan in the autumn of 1941. Jim's aunt Tattie was very popular in the pub.

There was a blacksmith named Bob Beadle and a saddler named Harry Riddell who worked in the Swan yard.

In 1942 his sister organised a concert and Jim helped her with the scenery. Five girls sang and his father handed sweets (black market sweets!) to the children who came to the concert. They raised 5 guineas for the war effort which they sent to Churchill's wife, Clementine. They received a thank-you letter back. Jim doesn't know what happened to the letter.

Jim remembers a land mine dropped in a field at Bury Farm, owned by Mr Hill, which was near the Swan. No one was injured but it blew slates off the roofs of houses, and windows were blown in.

After 1943 Italian prisoners of war were given more freedom and they wandered around the village. "I think their camp was in Lemsford". They made wooden objects and made a 'fire screen' for the Swan with a swan painted on the front. Jim has still got some of the objects.

One very hot Sunday afternoon in 1945, when Jim was alone at the pub, there was a knock at the back door and when he opened it there were two German prisoners standing there. They asked for a glass of water and after they had drunk it they left. Jim locked all the doors and windows afterwards!

Jim went to five or six different schools including one in London, one in Welwyn Garden City and one in St Albans.

[Jim now lives in St Albans (2024). These are his memories he shared with Nancy Hale in a telephone conversation in May 2024. Jim is 92 and, with his wife Beryl, came to the exhibition on 10 May.]

