

JOHN HINKLEY

I was born in Ramsgate and lived there for the first few months of the war but, when the Germans occupied France, they started to shell Dover and surrounding towns so we moved to London to live with my grandmother. It was not long before it became necessary to evacuate from London and for a short time I was sent with my sister to Wales and then to Hatfield Road, Wheathampstead.

I remember that at first we went to Hatfield Road, St. Albans. We had no car and there were very few Taxis so we were on foot, loaded with suitcases. When we eventually found our way to Wheathampstead, we were all exhausted.

My sister and I were billeted at different houses in the same road. I was alone, a little boy of eight, away from my family for the first time. I soon made friends with the other children in the road and in particular with a boy called "Digger" Hunt, who lived a couple of doors away. He seemed to know everyone and was my entry into "society". It was a big change from London, where we could not go far from home in case of air raids and there were very few children to play with because many had been evacuated from London at the beginning of the War.

The children in Wheathampstead were friendly and welcomed us and in all the time I was there, I did not have or hear a cross word between the children. Nor did I see anyone bullied: they all played together like one big happy family and there were no gangs.

Although there was a son at my billet, he went to the Catholic School and did not seem to play with the other children, but I soon got to know the other kids through "Digger" and we had many enjoyable games and adventures. We played lots of games in the field behind the houses and often played Hide-and-Seek in Devil's Dyke. Maurice, son of the house, had some connection with the **Mill** and I sometimes went there with him on a Saturday morning. It was still working then.

I remember when someone had the idea to collect **salvage**. We collected quite a lot but no one had thought to arrange for the authorities to take it away so it remained at the end of the road for ages.

There were **lots of soldiers training** in the area and we often watched them. I remember that one day one of them threw a thunder-flash and a local dog picked it up and ran with it. The flash exploded in the dog's mouth but, although the fur on its muzzle was singed, the dog was not seriously hurt.

Although this was a very happy time for me the happiness did not extend to school, which was an entirely different matter.

From the beginning my teacher seemed to take a dislike to me and whenever anything went wrong I was first to be blamed. I have since discovered that she had a strong dislike of incomers. She disliked me for no reason other than the fact that she thought that I was a Londoner, and she did not like Londoners. In common with a lot of adults in Wheathampstead, she thought all Londoners lived in slums and were liars and thieves.

My sister lost a lot of weight and was always hungry. I often spent my **pocket money** on buns for her. Our Mother became very worried and took her to see our Doctor in London who diagnosed malnutrition, so she was moved to another billet where she was properly fed. Shortly after this happened she passed her eleven plus and as the bombing in London had almost stopped she went back to home, rather than start a new school which presumably would have meant a daily journey either to St. Albans or Harpenden.

I moved to a new **billet at Castle Rise** with a family called Davidson or Davison. There was a young son of about three called Rodney and the landlady was very young and treated me like a son. She was a really lovely lady and restored my confidence in human nature. We were next door to the shop in Castle Rise. I was not allowed to play out very often and I missed the company of other children. The Davisons had lost a son of about my age in a road accident and I think that they were afraid that the same would happen to me.

Wheathampstead School was my sixth and my education was rather behind when I arrived there, and it slowly got worse. The teacher decided that I was a “thicky” and made no attempt to diagnose the problem or help me catch up. She did not understand that the disturbance caused by the changing of schools was the cause and not my lack of ability. My parents became very worried about my slow progress and decided to take me home to London. The teacher at the local school in South London was very good and saw what the problem was straight away. Within 18 months I was able to sit and pass my eleven plus and I won a scholarship to Grammar School, by the skin of my teeth.

Overall I was very happy in Wheathampstead. The children were lovely and welcomed us although one little girl told me that her mother had said that our mothers had sent us to Wheathampstead so they could go out to work and earn lots of money. I suppose that you could not blame the mother because there was **a news blackout** which forbade the release of details of air raids. The adults were not too bad to us, although I had very little contact with them, other than the people with whom I was billeted to - but “Oh! that teacher!”. I swear that I saw her getting off a broomstick as I arrived at school one morning.

Anyway, thanks for your hospitality Wheathampstead. I am sure that we must have seemed as strange to you as you did to us.

[extracts from an account written by John Hinkley, April 2009, for the late Brian Joyce's website. The complete account can now be found on the WHS website – <http://www.wheathampsteadheritage.org.uk/history-society-memories.asp>]