PATRICK BICKNELL

On September the 1st at three o'clock on a warm summer's afternoon three hundred or so of us, with ages varying from seven to fourteen years, marched from our school: **Excited, frightened, bemused, bewildered**. All these emotions we experienced as we travelled the short distance of a hundred yards to St. Pancras Station. Was it good to be out on the road and going one knows not where?

We waited, in our school uniforms, clutching our attaché cases, holding one **change of clothing** and **one pair of pyjamas**. With **gas mask** in its cardboard container, slung over shoulder and **name written on a parcel label** tied around our necks. Our parents were hiding their anxiety behind a mask of smiles and bland assurances that we would be home soon. Then, in minutes, we were ushered onto a train, knowing only at the last moment that this was the **Bedford line**. And from that moment my world changed.

The journey was short, uneventful and eminently forgettable. For the villagers it must have been a portentous sight as one after another double-decker buses from St. Albans, trundled down the steep hill into the village, disgorging their human cargoes into the village hall. The **billeting** arrangements were fairly well organised, given the circumstances, unlike other places where it was akin to a cattle sale. Potential foster parents were not in evidence. Whilst we were served tea without sugar, and a biscuit, **children were organised into single and family groups**.

Once they had been matched to suitable accommodation the children were ferried by car to their new homes. For many it would have been the **first ride in a car.** All the same it was a long and tiring process. Finally, at eight thirty, after waiting three and a half hours, my turn came. I was given a brown **paper carrier bag with rations**, supposedly to last the week-end. It contained, I recall, a tin of **corned beef**, a packet of very **hard biscuits,** and joy of joy a quarter pound bar of **Cadbury's milk chocolate** - the one that has a glass and a half of milk in every bar.

It was dark and I was a **scared little boy** just coming up to twelve. Scared because I had only had my **cleft palate** operated on less than a year earlier, and wondering if I would be able to make myself understood. Also, that September, I had been due to have further operations to repair my hare lip and have my nose straightened. Would there be children in the home who might make fun of me? I need not have worried. The couple I was billeted with were kind. I was so tired that I went straight to bed. For the first time in my life I had **my own bedroom**.

CHERRY TREES

Rescuing the stamped addressed card from my attaché case I wrote: "**Dear Mum & Dad,** my address is c/o **Mr. & Mrs. Manning**, 2 The Cherry Tree, Wheathampstead, Near St. Albans, Herts. I am alright. Your loving son."

I had woken to find myself in a modern bungalow. It was spotlessly clean. The **air was different** too. I had lived my short life to date in a fourth floor flat a hundred yards, as the crow flies, from Kings Cross and St. Pancras Stations. The living room was what would now be called a kitchen diner: I remember distinctly the gas cooker - it was brand new. But then it was hardly used. Mrs. Manning did all her cooking on the fire. The fireplace had an oven above and two movable hobs. This Dutch oven was very effective. The food was always delicious. The fire also provided hot water. I was one of the lucky ones. Graduating from a **tin bath** on a Friday evening **to a bath room** with running hot and cold water. Still only on Friday evening though. I wonder what the relationship is between Friday night and cleanliness?

On the living room wall hung a granddaughter clock which, irritatingly, chimed every quarter hour. A brass plated engraving revealed that this was a retirement present to Principal Officer **George Manning** from his colleagues at Wormwood Scrubs Prison. George Manning looked every inch an Edwardian prison officer. Tall, gaunt with a drooping moustache. A man of little conversation. Stern but kindly in a way. But I did not know then that he was seriously ill. His wife, the second Mrs. Manning (a not unusual occurrence in this village I was to learn) was a very different soul. From Durham, a cousin, I believe. Very affectionate and did her best to make me feel at home.

On that first morning there I was in the middle of nowhere. Not having the foggiest idea where nowhere was. I walked out from number two to find that **Cherry Trees** was a lane of eight bungalows on one side opposite a water filled, disused gravel pit hidden by a row of trees. The lane led to a secondary main road. The other end led to a level crossing. I met two boys I knew who were billeted at the level crossing keeper's house. It was great to see familiar faces. We discovered that we were at the boundary of the village and at the beginning of the new estate. We soon met up with other fellow pupils.

First impressions seemed favourable. A message informed us to be at **the village church** the next morning. We walked the mile or so there. Arriving at the church we appeared to be the only ones who had got the message.

So on that fateful Sunday morning, **3rd of September 1939** we were in church. It dawned on us that we were likely to be here for some time - at least until Christmas! In my case, however, it was **two years and three months**. Somehow, teachers managed to catch up with us and outlined the plan to continue our education. A **scheme** had been devised **to share the local school**. The indigenous children would have the mornings and we the afternoons, alternating weekly. A form of apartheid in fact. For there was a tendency to blame all the ills and misfortunes on the luckless Londoners.

I was well cared for by the Mannings. However, it was a **strict regime**. Meal times never varied: twelve thirty dinner, four thirty tea, eight thirty a hot drink and bed. The theory was, at least as far as tea time was concerned, that a young boy needed this meal immediately after school. Unfortunately for me this meant no dawdling with friends on the way home. Like the Tudor Queen Elizabeth and her baths, hands had to be washed before any morsel of food was consumed, whether needed or not. Shoes had to be polished and inspected by Mr. Manning. I remember the first time, being told off because I had not polished the instep! Although I knew that this was a pointless exercise. I was too young and vulnerable to object. Often though Mrs. Manning would whisper furtively to me "I've polished your shoes but don't tell George." I suspect that George had been in the prison service so long that he had become as institutionalised as his charges: and I was just another prisoner.

The country is dark at night in the winter at the best of times. With the added burden of **black-out,** evenings became an isolation. What youth activities there may have been would have been held in the village. Where I lived there was nothing. The Manning's would sit either side of the fire reading or listening to selected **radio programmes**. Whilst I would sit at the table making models from cardboard cut-out patterns. Which not only was I not any good at but bored me to death.

There were times I longed to be home. To dash from school dropping my cap and blazer on to the nearest chair or floor and yell "Mum I'm starving." And take a wad of bread and jam that my mother would have already had in preparation. Then rush out to play with my friends. And when it was bed time being tucked in and that good night kiss that ensures a sense of security and love. All this was missing.

My **parents visited** as often as possible. And were there that first week-end after receiving my card. But once winter set in it became impossible. Not only because of the weather and shorter days, but because they were not welcomed into the house. The Manning's were, of course, very civil to my parents and would courteously answer any questions regarding my welfare. Although my parents brought their own lunch I would have to be ready for dinner at twelve thirty and they would have to eat their lunch sitting on a bench outside the Cherry Tree pub. It was like visiting day at Borstal.

I was never alone. But away from school I was very lonely. War or no war children mature. With the beginnings of puberty during the latter months at the Cherry Trees, I became more isolated. Wondering what was happening and no one to turn to. I was worried. Especially so when one morning I woke horrified, convinced that I had wet the bed. Mrs. Manning smiled when I told her all apologetically. "That's all right" she said. My biggest fear was that she would tell George.

That first Christmas I came home. The Mannings hoped that I would not return. Not that we did not get on, far from it, for I believe I brought a little sunshine into their lives. But something I was totally unaware of was that George was terminally ill with cancer.

I left the warmth and love of my home and said goodbye, not only to my parents but to my brother. Funnily we had grown closer to each other during that three months absence. Returning to the village in the first week of January 1940 into that awful winter. I do not remember a time when I felt so lonely, so desolate, so utterly miserable. I can still recall walking up to the nearby heath on a cold grey afternoon, hoping that I would meet someone I knew. Someone of my own age to talk to. There was not a soul. I stood alone and cried my eyes out. I so wanted to go home.

Four months later I moved into number **8 The Cherry Trees**. Shortly after, George Manning died.

SCHOOLING

Schooling was a problem. The sheer logistics of it ensured that it would be so. The **village school** had been built to accommodate the children from a total population of 1,800. Overnight the number was increased by some 300, all children. Contingency plans were drawn up. It was decided to have **two shifts**, alternating between morning and afternoon. The village children having one session and the evacuees the other. This procedure lasted about two months or so.

As we were in the period of the so called **'phoney war'** where there had been little military activity and no air raids there was a slow drift back to London. By Christmas 1939 the **first batch** of fourteen-year-old pupils left school and **returned home**. The village children returned full time to their school, whilst we were accommodated in the available village halls. I remember one was attached to the Congregational Church. But the one I most vividly recall was the **club house of a local firm, Helmets.** And that is what they manufactured, which they distributed world-wide.

Helmets Hall was a **corrugated roofed hut**. The only heating came from a single combustion stove placed centrally in the hall. Teaching really consisted of control and amuse. We had not arrived with a full complement of teaching staff, and by the end of the Christmas term 1939 their number had dwindled.

January 1940 will be imprinted in my memory for ever. It was, weather-wise, one of the **worst winters**. The village lay mainly in a valley with fairly high hills on its southern side. Helmets Hall was situated on top of a hill – Helmets Hill *[Brewhouse Hill]* and completely isolated. We froze around the combustion stove and choked on the smoke driven back into the hall by the

high winds. Then it snowed. I remember vividly being sent home early as the snow began to drift. The few of us billeted at the other end of the village tramped home a mile or so along the ridge of the hill negotiating **six-foot snow drifts** in the biting wind. We were singing to keep up our spirits. Oh to have been back in in my cosy flat in Kings Cross.

This form of so-called education continued well into 1940. **By the end of summer term 1940, more** fourteen-year-old children had left school and **returned to London**. The general drift, however, ceased with the onslaught of the **Battle of Britain** and the **Blitz on the Capital**. The teaching staff had further diminished, making it almost impossible to continue even with this limited education**. It was decided to absorb the evacuees** into the village school. This was agreeable in many respects. The **school building** was a relatively modern bungalow building. With a central assembly hall and four classrooms leading from the corridor fronting the building. The school entrance was along a drive leading to a front lawn. The school was set in gardens and the rear was an open field. To one side and separate from the main building was a **domestic science room** for the girls and a **woodwork centre** for the boys. Certainly more comfortable than the previous makeshift arrangements. And more conducive to learning! Would that it had been so.

Coming from a London County Council school we were in for a cultural shock. The first morning we assembled in the hall. But instead of the usual 'Good morning boys and girls', followed by a hymn and a short prayer, we were plunged into a full-scale **Church of England morning service**. Hymns, chanted psalms, collect for the day and prayers - the lot except a sermon. For this was a Church of England school, and named after the nearby parish **Church of St Helen**: very rigid it was, too! It was meaningless to us.

I doubt if any of us had set foot inside an Anglican church. I know I hadn't. This is not to imply that we were unschooled in Christian beliefs, far from it. The majority of us had been members of the **Kings Cross Methodist Mission Sunday School**. A very lively and active institution. But more on this later. The morning service was followed by religious instruction for an hour, including the teaching of the catechism, preparing us all for confirmation prior to leaving school. We thought, in our innocence, that this was just to start the week. Imagine our horror when this was repeated daily.

The beautiful school gardens (and they were beautiful) we soon discovered were not for admiring. We not only had to work in them but we also had a **weekly classroom lesson devoted to horticulture**. The various beneficial aspects of composts and fertilisers, both organic and chemical were revealed to us. The use of pesticides in conditions such as *phytosphorous infestans* (potato blight to the uninitiated) and crossing fruit trees by grafting were explained. **Two sessions of woodwork** were also part of the curriculum. What time was left was used for such extraneous subjects as arithmetic, English, geography and history!

By now there was only one teacher left from our own school - Mr. Edwin Fooks, our senior teacher. Mr. Fooks was not that far from retirement. Poor man, with the added role of social worker-cum-loco parentis, he did his best for us. He was kind and understood that we were only children and separated from our homes and family. The **head master** of the village school, a Mr. John Housden, had no such scruples. He was a bully and a sadist. Never happier than when welding a cane: which he did for the most trivial misdemeanour committed in or out of school. Although he taught well, the lessons were never comfortable.

One incident of this man's intimidation I remember well. In my last months at school I suggested to fellow pupils that we should organise a collection in the school in response to a **B.B.C. Children's Hour appeal** on behalf of **Mrs. Churchill's Red Cross Aid** to Russia Fund. This was enthusiastically accepted and Mr. Fooks gave it his blessing. The headmaster wrote a cheque for the amount collected and I was ordered to write the accompanying letter. He gave me an envelope with the opening at one end. When I had addressed the envelope he

sneered 'Don't you know how to address an envelope?' and tore it up. Apparently I had written it the wrong way round so that the opening was on the left side instead of the right. I was fourteen years old and had never addressed a business envelope in my life. I felt angry and humiliated. All the effort I had put into this worthwhile effort he had reduced to nothing. However, a couple of months later, after I had left school, I received a charming letter from Mr. Fooks, thanking me for the work I had done for the appeal and enclosing the **letter of thanks** from 'Children's Hour'.

I have often thought it strange that the headmaster not only gave the horticulture lessons but also supervised the practical sessions *[the Gardening Club]* . He also conceived the idea that the **school dinners** should, as far as vegetables were concerned, be self - supporting. This he considered should be our contribution to the war effort. So we boys in the senior class were detailed to dig the field at the back of the school. It was hard labour and proved a futile exercise, producing nothing.

It seemed to me that the object of this rural church school was to produce God fearing Anglican communicant farm hands. Fortunately they failed in the majority of children. The one good thing about this merging of the two schools was that **barriers between the village and London children** were finally broken. Most of my friends and companions in those final months of my sojourn in Wheathampstead were village boys. My particular friend was Dennis Warner who lived just up the road.

I'VE GOT SIXPENCE

Life without money is difficult. So even evacuees needed personal finance.

I well remember that in the early days of the war I received a **weekly allowance of sixpence**. In today's terms that is 2½p. My mother would enclose a postal order with her weekly letter. Nationally this caused problems because at that time there was a large increase in the number of **postal orders** and they could only be cashed at post offices. It wasn't long before the treasury allowed postal orders as currency. Which made the purchase of such essentials as sweets easier. That is until **sweets virtually disappeared** prior to a rationing system being introduced. Fortunately I was not that far from London, some twenty-five miles. So I did have frequent visits from my parents and grandmother and maiden aunt. This meant that my weekly allowance received regular top ups. Strangely I cannot recall how my pocket money increased or by how much.

But it must have been because it wasn't long before inflation reared its ugly head and **prices increased**. Applying some simple statistics: if the three hundred children who initially arrived in Wheathampstead all received sixpence a week, and that is a big assumption, the total sum would in decimal currency be £7.50. Today's children would find it incredible and probably unbelievable.

Changes are inevitable and in war time fairly rapid. Many goods such as grocery and meat were delivered to those at the far edge of the village. **The Co-Op van** would arrive and open up one side like a shop counter. Money did not change hands. Co-Op members, and Mrs. Manning was one, had **metal tokens** of varying value. I presume these were purchased before from a main store, probably in Harpenden. **Petrol rationing** and staff depleted by military service soon put paid to that. The one delivery service whose passing I mourned was that of soft drink firm Corona.

The local lads had one big advantage - **bicycles**. An essential really in a village. Pleadings to parents and grandmother bore fruit. Within a few months I had one. A good solid roadster. No gears or any such refinements as that. The bike cost, wait for it, three pounds! After a few grazes on arms and knees I mastered the art of riding on two wheels. A young married man living next door taught me how to mend punctures and replace brake blocks. The bike was a

great liberator. There were three of us who took to the road. I remember some of the **places we biked to**: Hatfield, St. Albans, Harpenden and Ayot St. Lawrence, where Bernard Shaw was living. I remember well thinking what a lovely place it was.

As I mentioned earlier, a large number of us had been members of the King's Cross Methodist Mission Sunday School. At the edge of the village, where the new modern development begins, stands a small **Methodist Chapel** next to a playing field known as **The Folly**. We turned up en-masse at the Sunday School and completely transformed it. One of the Sunday School teachers and his wife, **Mr and Mrs Deville**, who originated from North London, were pleased to have us and in them we had an ally. I recall **Christmas tea parties** and a visit to Whipsnade Zoo, organised by the Chapel.

During my stay in Wheathampstead I regularly attended **Sunday School** at the Folly Methodist Chapel, jumping on my bike at 9.30am and cycling the mile or so to it. I often think that **Mrs. Hawkins**, who was a pillar of the Anglican Church, wondered what motivated me to go to the small Folly Chapel when St Helen's church played an important role in the village life and quite a number of children attended. In their final school year pupils were being prepared for confirmation. The class was visited by no less an eminence than the Dean of St. Albans Cathedral. It was his brief to ensure that we had been well instructed in the Catechism. Whoever was deemed to be the most knowledgeable received the **Dean's prize**.

One thing that occurred which was of great benefit to me was the setting up of a **speech therapy clinic** at a hospital in St. Albans. The clinic was a department of the Hospital for Nervous Diseases in Marylebone London. A circular must have been sent to surrounding schools. Mr. Fooks immediately arranged for me to attend, which I did every Friday afternoon. The school paid my bus fares. This was to have far-reaching consequences later.

TOMORROW IS A LOVELY DAY

At first my move to 8, Cherry Trees appeared to be a good thing. Later it became a very unhappy time. **The Jobson's** (strangely I cannot recall their Christian names) were a young couple. In their late twenties and not long married I would judge, from this distance in time. He worked in the building industry and she, like most married women of that era, stayed at home.

The home was not as well appointed as the Manning's. It lacked that sense of homeliness. Obviously they were building their nest and this, in those days, took time as well as money, which was not in great supply. They did their best to make me feel at home. I was included in visits to Mrs. Jobson's family who lived a short walk away. Her father, I recall, had been a miner and had taken part in the famous **'Jarrow March'** earlier in the thirties. How the family came to be in the village I do not know.

I recall one very amusing incident. Mrs. Jobson's father was not renowned for his generosity, understandingly so considering his background. One evening he shocked the whole family by giving me sixpence. Perhaps he knew more than the others the sense of loneliness or despair I may have been feeling. Home life was much more relaxed, more elastic, than with the Mannings. How much this was due to the Jobson's or my own sense of routine is open to conjecture. Certainly they were friendly and I was reasonably happy.

Disaster struck, however, when Mr. Jobson was **called up into the services**. His wife was unable to cope. They had hire purchase commitments which she was unable to meet from the army allowance. My mother, on one of her visits to me, advised her to contact the various companies and explain the difficulties. I suspect that she had no idea how to write such a letter. She spent more time out of the bungalow and I often found myself locked out until a late hour. I felt that Mrs. Jobson just fell apart. There were lots of things that went wrong, far too numerous and, from my view, too emotional to recall. In an endeavour to save money from the **ten and sixpence allowance** she received from the government for my keep, she cut

down on food. Sunday dinner now consisted of one sausage and potatoes. She just could not be bothered to cook. I was hungry and very lonely. How I missed the security of the Mannings.

So in that beautiful **summer of 1940**, in Britain's darkest days and about to face its finest hour, I - like my country - felt alone and abandoned. I wrote to my parents pleading to be taken home. They were very concerned. I had never given them cause to worry. I had never once complained during the eight months I had been away. I returned home, ostensibly, for a break at the end of the summer term. Unfortunately this coincided with the **early days of the blitz**. I had exchanged the fresh country air for **stuffy air raid shelters**. Ironically I had been evacuated to escape air raids. My return had defeated the object. After a few days it was decided that I should return to the Cherry Trees and that my parents would speak to Mrs. Jobson and the billeting officer. In the meantime a neighbour contacted his sister, who lived in St Albans. She, in turn, contacted a very good friend who lived in the village. This elderly couple agreed to take me in. Arrangements were made via the billeting officer. Within a couple of weeks I left the Cherry Trees.

42, Necton Road, a couple of hundred yards or so from the village high street along the Hatfield Road, was to be my home until I left school. Here I was really happy for the first time since I had left home a year earlier. Necton Road, a U-shaped road, could not have been more different from the Cherry Trees. It was part of the village and **consisted mainly of terraced cottages**.

The front door, which was never used, opened onto the sitting room. There was no hallway. The furniture was **Victorian**, with red plush upholstered chairs and settee. There was a **piano with candle brackets**. A door led into the sitting room in which there was a dining table and chairs and two armchairs. In an alcove by the fireplace stood a large upright desk with pigeon hole shelves above: this was where **Mr. Hawkins,** the **local coal merchant**, did his accounts. A window at the back of the room looked out to the small back garden and greenhouse. Next to the window a door led to the kitchen. Beyond which was the scullery and toilet. There was no access from the kitchen, one had to go into the garden to reach it.

Some of the houses had electricity. 42 however, was gas lit - on the ground floor only. The bedrooms were reached by a cupboard staircase from a door in the living room. There were three bedrooms, the front of which Mr. and Mrs. Hawkins had. Mine was the centre room which led into the third back room. In my room was a Victorian washstand with basin and jug. It was **candlelight** to bed and back to bathing in the kitchen in a **tin bath**. Light years away from the bungalows at The Cherry Trees, but paradise in comparison.

<u>THE FINAL YEAR AS AN EVACUEE</u>

The final year or so as an evacuee was spent with Mr. and Mrs. Hawkins in Necton Road and were the happiest times. Mrs. Hawkins was one of the kindest persons I have ever met. Although a much over-used cliché, 'A truer Christian', I have no hesitation in ascribing this to her. I was treated as part of the family. Her kindness was not reserved just for me but extended to my family as well. Often during the blitz, when there had been particularly heavy bombing, she would invite my mother or sometimes my grandmother and maiden aunt to spend the week-end in Wheathampstead. Not only did this give me what is now referred to as quality time with my close family members, but gave them a respite and a bit of peace and quiet away from the bombing terror and the air raid shelters. One of the first things I did on returning from my wedding in Scotland, in 1955, was to take my wife to meet Mrs. Hawkins. Even after these years Evelyn Hawkins, her niece, who lived at number 46, and I write to each other at Christmas.

Obviously after seventy years memories of names fade. But I do recall (Eric?) O'Brien, A red headed lad name of Griffiths. There was a girl in Necton Road - Audrey Milton. I'm not sure

but there was a lad lived in the village Don (Milton or Whittle?) There were two other lads who I used to cycle with a lot , but their names really escape me.

There was one teacher, again whose name I cannot remember. A lady who had escaped from Holland with her sister, during the Nazi invasion, and arrived at our school. She attempted to introduce us to the literary classics - Shakespeare's Macbeth. It was hard going but she persevered, for which I shall be forever grateful.

Being an evacuee was an experience that I and, I am sure, most others could have well done without. There have been horror stories about this period. However, in my case I was well treated in the main. At eighty-four I can look back and say that, apart from having a 'good billet', what made it memorable was that I was just another boy in the village as far as the local lads were concerned.

I returned home to London, at Christmastide 1941: two years and three months after being evacuated. Within four months I was in hospital for life-changing operations. But that's another story.

[the full account of Patrick Bicknell's wartime memories can be found on the WHS website - http://www.wheathampsteadheritage.org.uk/history-society-memories.asp]