

## **Mrs Diane Taylor's (née Brothers) account of her experiences living in Wheathampstead as an evacuee during WW2. (Notes from an hour's conversation on the telephone with Ruth Jeavons on 16 August 2007)**

Diane's father, Harry John Brothers, was born in the Ship Inn Wheathampstead in 1896. His father had the same name and was the publican there. At the age of 14 Diane's father moved to London to work as a telegraph boy. He lodged in Fulham with his grandmother on his mother's side. During this time he met and married Diane's mum. Diane was born in 1934.

When war came in 1939 Diane was sent out of London to stay with her father's sister, [...] Smith who lived next door but one to a Mrs Walker at 86 Marford Road opposite the allotments. Diane attended St Helen's school (in the old building) for the next 6 years when Mr Housden was headmaster. She remembered Miss Young (i/c second years) Miss Collins of Standard 1 also Mrs Crawley who taught needlework classes with embroidery and tapestry. Diane returned to London in 1945 aged between 11 and 12.

### **Memories of Wheathampstead**

Dr Smallwood saved her life when she almost died from peritonitis. She'd been up all night sick and ill and her aunty called for the doctor. He took her to St Albans hospital (Oster Hospital?) in his car on a foggy morning. She was in a chair lift. "If he'd been another half hour I'd have been a goner", she said. Doctor Smallwood lost two sons during that war.

### **Food**

Her uncle, Harold Smith, had an allotment so they were OK for food, particularly vegetables. They went gleaning and blackberrying and there were chickens in the back garden. Her aunty made jam and on a Friday a cake – a wartime cake with no fat, just a few currants. Rice pudding and treacle was good and grand dad occasionally brought home a rabbit on his back. Tom Rolph worked on the Dump. She remembered Sunday teas in particular and the big family gatherings at 86 Marford Road.

### **Family history**

John Brothers, the grandfather who owned the Ship, was married twice. His first wife was Rhoda. She had several boys all named after Old (and New) Testament boys: Abraham, Isaac and Luke. Rhoda died in 1846. Diane's grandmother was Miriam Rose Brothers, who was the second wife of Alan Brothers. They had John and Diane. Alan Brothers married a Smith. Miriam Rose Brothers second marriage she had three children with Rolph: Maud, May and Albert. (complicated!)

Other names recollected: Miriam Slough and Gloria Noblett. Her father's sister, Aunty Helen Smith, worked at Helmets and was also a nurse in the Red Cross. Her uncle worked at De Havilland and she recalled him giving her a ride up the garden path – (a piggy back?) Special Constable PC Barker always wanted to make sure the Cory Wrights at Four Limes were safe during air raids.

The siren was nicknamed "Wheathampstead Annie". It sounded a single note. Her friend Jean Patten had a trench for shelter during a raid. She used to play dolls with Jean. They would all play on the big bank outside the Marford Road houses. At the start of the war there were only four houses there and you could climb over to the fields at the back of the Cory Wright house at Four Limes.

There were nurseries off Dyke Lane owned by Mr Barker and a bomb fell on them one night. "I was under the stairs with my dolls. Heard a swishing noise. Was told to 'Stay under the stairs!' The bomb had hit the cucumbers. Afterwards we all went up to the bomb hole. The boys collected shrapnel. We saw a dog fight in the sky."

### **Other evacuees and remembered names**

*Eileen Rodgers* from Kings Cross

*Patsie Mansfield* went to the Catholic school at the end of the Marford Road opposite the Catholic church. It was a nice-looking house past Miss Warren's house. We went to see a play there. Patsie played the part of Anne Parsons.

*Joyce Thackerill* (a Cobb).

*Pat and Raymond Cobb*

*Violet Bracey* who lived next door.

My uncle and aunt died in the 1970s but I always loved coming back to Wheathampstead.

### **Walks**

To Nicholls Farm to Nomansland via Dyke Lane.

To Coleman Green near the John Bunyan. Nancy was the daughter.

Long meadows up Gustard Wood to the Cross Keys. Up Brewhouse Hill to the Elephant and Castle. Home for lunch.

We saw bombs from London exploding over the Dump.

Chennells: Friday lunchtime we'd all rush to the paper shop for the comics. Lorna Rowe was the first to sell ice creams with cornets after the war.

### **German prisoners of war**

The boys threw marmalade oranges at them when they were being convoyed to work on the farms from Batford. "One of our army men sat at the end of the lorry with a gun to watch the cows being milked." He was the guard. There were Italian prisoners too. Ruth Chapman, Sunday school teacher took us for a walk once and we met them at Nicholls Farm and made a wooden ring with a snake. Wiggling snakes...(?)

Blain's Farm: Every Sunday we'd walk down Sheepcote Lane. Janet Lock (now Power) came too to see Billy the Bull and watch the cows being milked.

My mother and I lodged with Mrs Bracey for 2-3 years. She had 2 bedrooms and there was no bathroom – just a tin bath.

The milkman had a horse and cart to deliver the milk.

### **Gas mask practice**

Mr Nobbie Clark, the ARP warden, collected the children to test how quickly they could put the mask on – like Donald Duck (!?) “I was terrified and couldn’t stand the smell. You had to put up your hand to go to the toilet. I wouldn’t put it on. I used to scream the place down.” He used to come round and tell you if there was light showing (in your house). You could hear the difference if it was a German plane (‘old Jerry’).

“One day when I was blackberrying near Coleman Green with my father, who’d come to visit from London, we heard a Doodlebug. Dad pushed me down under an oak tree. We could see it going near Marford Road. It went over our houses. It dropped in Redbourn.”

Happier memories of winter snow and lovely summers.

Her father would come to visit by train on a Sunday. He waved his handkerchief and I waved mine. He’d be wearing a trilby hat a black Crombie coat and waistcoat. My aunty once said the train is in the station and I used to meet him halfway. He’d go back on Monday morning on the workmen’s train at 4 or 5 am. He was a postman in London – started as a telegraph boy at 14 and retired as an overseer at 65 years old. He died aged 66. My mother was alone for 40 years and stayed in London all her life. She died in 2001. My mum came every fortnight. She was a big lady and worked at John Lewis in Oxford Street throughout the war. Selling lampshades. The Duchess of Sutherland bought hers there. Once they slept in the Holborn underground station all night during an air raid.

One night we were watching the blitz in our garden and could see the sky glowing all red.

My uncle drove a 500-foot-long transporter to carry aeroplane spares to Coventry and Plymouth. They called it the “Queen Mary”. He worked for De Havilland on test beds where the spitfire came from. John Cunningham flew the test planes. One of the De Havilland men was killed outside our house driving his motorbike. Two friends were killed on motorbikes after we left.

We used to go to Sunday School up on Brewhouse Hill in the Congregational Church.