

Evacuees in Westcott 1939

In August 1939 the summer holiday came to an abrupt end for London schoolchildren when they received a message on the wireless telling them to return to school and to take with them a day's food and a change of clothes in readiness for evacuation to the country. For the next few days they dutifully went to school with their food, suitcase and gas mask until, on Friday 1st September, Hitler's armies invaded Poland and the government gave the order to evacuate immediately.

Arrangements had been made for the children of Dulwich Central School to come to Westcott, although they did not know that until they arrived at Dorking Station. The following extracts are taken from a 'Record of Evacuation' that the evacuees made at the time:

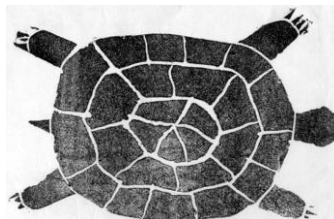
In the days before the evacuation: *With the music mistress leading, we had community singing. We sang the most jovial songs in our song books. Also we went over the park to play cricket and rounders. We also had to have rehearsals, to be ready for the time when we were evacuated. On Friday when we filed into the hall for prayers, the headmaster quietly told us that we should not be going home for dinner and that we should be leaving early in the afternoon.*

Having arrived at Dorking Station and had a medical examination in the Dorking Halls: *We were then taken to Westcott by bus. When we got there I joined forces with three friends and we waited for someone to collect us. We sat mournfully eating biscuits and discussing what we thought our fate would be. Then an old lady came up to us. "Are you booked?" she asked. "No", we chorussed. So the lady took our names, and after a bit of fussing around we left the Reading Room.*

Everybody was allocated a billet: *I live in a house called Tanglewood in Westcott Street. The lady is named Miss Bamford. The housekeeper's name is Miss Winter. Another lady comes in the morning to help with the housekeeping. Her name is Mrs. Lucas. We have a fine Persian cat named Jeff. He is a very good cat, but he kills birds quite frequently. We try to stop him, but have failed up to now. We have two gardeners, one Dinnage, and the other Johnson. Dinnage is very old and has been with Miss Bamford for twelve years but Johnson has only been gardener for two years, and is not very old.*

With the arrival of the evacuees it was necessary to introduce a 'shift' system at the village school. Half the day was spent in school, the rest of the day was the 'outshift'.

The 'outshift' activities also included a pottery class where heads and pots were made from clay on two potters' wheels in the basement of the Mill School. Lino-cuts were also



on the agenda including the following

It also contained the following entry by W. Wingfield:

My Christmas at Westcott: *At the Rookery there are billeted four boys and myself. The place is owned by Mr and Mrs Brooke who did their best to give us a happy Christmas. On the first day of our holidays, which was a Saturday, we had three tickets for a cinema show at the*

Embassy, Dorking, but those at the Rookery did not go. Instead we went pheasant shooting at Arundel with Mr Brooke.

On Christmas Eve our mothers came down. Mrs Brooke entertained them to lunch and also a Christmas tree was provided with presents on it for our mothers. Mrs Brooke gave out the presents including a lovely train for my baby brother. My Mother was very pleased with her presents as well.

The next day which was Christmas day was a very pleasant day for us for we had many presents from Mrs Brooke and the maids. We gave them presents in return. I bought Mrs Brooke a fruit dish and a vase and the maids chocolates and handkerchiefs.

During the next two days we went sledging and Shephard hit a mole hill and got smothered in snow. On Friday we went to the party at the Legion Hall, where there were plenty of cakes and tea provided. Afterwards Mr Palmer gave a cinematograph show and we had some films among which was 'Tarzan finds a Son'.

By Saturday the ponds at The Rookery were frozen over and we were paid for cleaning and sweeping the ice for skaters to come and enjoy themselves. We did the same on Sunday and Monday came we went reluctantly to school after spending such a happy Christmas.

On the Wednesday before Christmas the evacuees presented three Christmas plays in the Legion Hall. In the interval between each play the 'Deerleap Quartette' entertained including an updated version of the old Somerset folk-song 'Admiral Benbow'. Their modern admiral was Admiral Harwood who was in command of the ships H.M.S. Ajax, Achilles and Exeter which had recently fought the Graf Spee and forced her into Montevideo harbour.

Dulwich Dumplings: The number of children in the village increased dramatically with the arrival of evacuees from London. Miss Pringle of Wintershaw on Westcott Green was the Billeting Officer but in her contribution to Dulwich Central School's 'Record of Evacuation' she described her role as a 'dumper'; whose best endeavours are doomed to failure; she is despised by the local 'foster parents' when she is unable to change the sex or age of children she 'dumps' in their care; she is no more popular with the real parents because she cannot provide palatial country houses as pictured by Hollywood; she is inundated with forms to fill in from the Government and she is regarded by everybody else as a newsagency, tea room, estate agent, domestic bureau, post office, local directory, railway timetable and Citizen's Advice Bureau.

Despite all this it is evident that Miss Pringle enjoyed her role because of the 'dumplings'. Dumplings' are creatures of either sex between the ages of four and sixteen who have been removed from an urban home and dumped down into a rural one. Her letter goes on to describe them. "At first sight its habits may appear strange. It usually starts with the notion that it is slightly superior to 'country bumpkins', but these latter soon discover that a dumpling who lives in London all too often knows less about his city than his country cousin. Some of these species despise 'bunnies' food such as lettuce and green vegetables but seem to appreciate 'afters'. Others, used to the lighted streets of pre-September 1939, do not take kindly to the rule of 'early to bed'.

Miss Pringle concluded, "Without dumplings the community would not be worth living for. They are welcome visitors and the country districts are the richer for this dumping; when they depart many a bumpkin's heart - as well as home - will be desolated by their going."

Evacuated to Westcott The arrival of evacuees in Westcott in September 1939 meant that the Village School had to cope with twice as many pupils and a shift system was introduced. The

word 'outshift' was coined, for lack of a better one, to describe the time when an alternative classroom had to be found for the children of Dulwich Central School. The following extracts from the pupils' own 'Record of Evacuation' illustrate some of the ways in which the 'outshift' was used.

"Much of our time has been taken up on rambles. In such beautiful surroundings pleasant walks are easily forthcoming. Perhaps the longest ramble of all was to Holmbury St Mary. Another interesting ramble is up to Ranmore, where maps can be studied with the real thing in front of one's eyes. Many objects can be picked out such as the Tower on Leith Hill, the Rookery ponds, the Mill pond and Dorking. Seeing the real thing and seeing it on a map helps one to understand maps better."

"With the close of summer came the problem of what we could do during wet days and the first step in solving this was the hiring of the British Legion Hut. Here we were able to take part in various activities."

"One of the masters suggested Model Aeroplane Construction and a majority of the boys responded enthusiastically to the suggestion. Mr Osborne made the necessary arrangements with the Cloud Model Aircraft Co. at Dorking, and managed to have the cost of five shillings per kit reduced to three shillings and threepence. Mr Hayter, a master at Dorking County School, kindly consented to give us a talk on the subject. In a week's time the construction work was in full swing"

"Miss Colam at The Dene volunteered to give lessons on Nature Study. She supplied us with exercise books in which we write essays about what we have learnt on our walks and draw pictures of the birds and plants that we observed..... We studied pond life and we went to the Mill-pond to see if we could find any live mussels but all we found was empty shells. We also studied fungi which are to be found growing on rotten trees and in damp places. Miss Colam's chauffeur found a fungus nearly as large as a football but we had to throw it away as it had an evil smell. We learnt about bees and Miss Colam had a real piece of bee's wax. Sometimes when we were out at the Mill-pond, Mr Hasluck gave us permission to pick up some of his apples, which were very nice."

"The gardening began in September, and we were taken by Mr Jones. The ground when we started was over-grown with weeds, and a man was employed to cut down these weeds and some of the long grass which was growing. To do this a scythe was used. The Westcott school kindly lent us their tools, so we were able to start work right away."

"We arrived at Westcott at the end of the 1939 cricket season. The secretary of the Westcott Cricket Club kindly gave us permission to use their ground whenever we wanted it. We played two matches against the masters and boys of Westhumble on this ground and each time we managed to make a drawn game of it."

"At the end of the cricket season Mr Brooke of the Rookery lent us a piece of ground on which to play games. At first we played handball, until most of us had our football boots sent down from home. In the middle of November Mr Osborne our football master organised a match between ourselves and Belmont Preparatory School. We finished victors by 3 goals to 2."

"Miss Cullen kindly offered to take a class for music. We have learned many songs mostly old English folk-songs; 'Admiral Benbow', 'The Jolly Blackmen', 'Where'er You walk' and 'Under The Greenwood Tree', being only a few."

