

Escape to the Country

During WW2, the voluntary evacuation of children from cities to the safety of the countryside was organized by the Government. Jean Tomlinson, (nee Train), was evacuated from Hull and stayed at Sandhall from 1940 to 1942. The following is an account of her war-time experiences.

I was born in 1931 at Rugby Street in the Hessle Road area of West Hull. Later on we moved to a nicer house with a long garden at the back in Chiltern Street, near Grandma Train. I lived with Mum, Dad and my brother Arthur who was four years younger than me.

My father was a delivery man for the Co-operative and Mum was a housewife with plenty to do at home. She had a routine, and took me with her on daily shopping expeditions to Hessle Road until I was five and started going to Chiltern Street School.

After school and at weekends, we could play in the streets which were free from traffic then. Sometimes my parents took us to the Langham cinema in Hessle Road, which was very grand, with wide sweeping staircases near the entrance.

Early signs that war was imminent included rationing, gas masks and the blackout. We used thick black material to cover the windows at night and decorated them with criss-cross strips of sticky tape to stop shattered glass from flying around. To prevent accidents, white lines were painted down the centre of roads.

In September, 1939, there was a National Registration Day, followed by the issue of Identity Cards which had to be carried at all times.

After war was declared, the evacuation of children from cities likely to be attacked by the Luftwaffe was organized and a lot of my friends left for the countryside with some of our teachers. Due to a shortage of staff, we had bigger classes and some schools had to open on a rota basis.

The first few months of the war became known as 'the phoney war' because although all these National and Civil Defence plans were put into action, there was no sign of the Germans. Most of the evacuees had returned home by Christmas.

In May, 1940, the bombing of Hull began in earnest and I can remember the sirens going off and spending nights inside the Anderson shelter in Grandma's garden. My father, who was exempt from the armed forces, had joined the Home Guard and was helping to defend the city during the raids. Those first night raids were mainly incendiary attacks on the dockland areas and factories, and preceded the Hull Blitz that would last until 1942. Hull was a very accessible target and suffered from constant Luftwaffe attention until the last air raid in March, 1945.

I was nine when I was evacuated with Mum and Arthur in June, 1940. Because he hadn't started school, Mum was allowed to accompany us as a helper. We met up with the others at Chiltern Street School and boarded buses that were lined up waiting for us. Everyone wore labels and carried packed lunches and their gas masks.

Eventually, the bus dropped us off at Skelton village hall. Mrs. Scholfield was in charge of things and after chatting to Mum, she chose six evacuees to stay at her home, Sandhall Manor, which was surrounded by a beautiful park. There was Mum, me, Arthur, Pat Cockrel, Joan Turgoose and Audrey Hairsine, although Audrey became homesick and went home. Not all children liked being evacuated. The gamekeeper, Mr. Sedgewick, took two brothers called Winston and Keith, and the Atkinsons at Laundry Cottage already had grandchildren staying with them, who came from Cherry Burton.

Once in the countryside, you had to start a new school which wasn't easy, and Skelton school became crowded with all the extra children. I was taught by Mrs. Green, who was very nice, but it must have been difficult teaching children of different ages all in the same room. I wasn't used to that and think my education was disrupted through having to change schools. Arthur started school and was in Miss Wilmott's class. She had an artificial leg, but still soldiered on, doing her job.

Every Sunday at the Hall, Mrs. Scholfield held a Sunday school in the library and played the organ. One of our favourite hymns was "Onward Christian Soldiers", an appropriate choice at the time, when the Home Front was determined that Britain would win the war.

We were made to feel welcome at the Hall. Mum was a very capable person and soon made herself useful, helping Isabel, the cook, who had more to do. There was a sitting-room near the kitchen, where we played with a lovely doll's house and a rocking-horse that had belonged to the Scholfields' daughters, Mary and Helen.

They were away helping the war effort and when they came home on leave, we liked to hide behind the door and watch them come out of their rooms wearing long dresses for dinner. If Helen caught us spying on her, she'd bundle us all back into bed, which was great fun.

Outside, we played in the park and made dens under the laurel bushes, and once I found a dead hare which four of us carried back to the game larder. Sometimes we were allowed to pick apples in the walled garden. Mrs. Scholfield trained foxhound puppies and two of them, Gordia and Gilti, used to run around with us and get very dirty.

One evening, while I was in bed with chicken pox, some of the children were playing on the landing-stage when Winston fell into the River Ouse and drowned. One of the girls ran to fetch Mrs. Scholfield who was getting ready for dinner, and she tried to save him but arrived too late. At the inquest in York, the verdict was accidental death. Winston's brother Keith stayed on at Wood Cottage for a while.

Mrs. Scholfield asked Mum if she'd look after a toddler named Brenda whose mother, another evacuee, was in hospital having a baby, and lent us a pram to take her for walks in the park. On one occasion, her horses were grazing there and surrounded the pram, making us nervous, until Mrs. Scholfield came to 'rescue' us. We liked Rodney, the hardy little pony that was kept out in all kinds of weather and wandered about in the snow.

Mum used to walk with us to the village school and we were just setting off one morning, when a lone German aircraft appeared out of nowhere, strafing the surrounding area. We were pulled back into the kitchen and had to wait until it was safe to go out. This was an isolated incident, but we moved from the top floor of the house into the old nursery below, which was more accessible in an emergency.

Local people listened to the wireless and relied on the press for news about the war. Hull was never mentioned and for a long time all we ever heard were reports of air raids over a 'North Eastern Town'. We were worried about my father who'd moved in with Grandma Train while we were away.

Our house at Chiltern Street had taken a hit, so he found another in Aylsford Street, not far from the football stadium, where looters broke in and stole some of our things. Looting was regarded as a despicable crime and severely punished at a time when every neighbourhood retained a strong spirit of community and the Civil Defence was dedicated to the welfare of bomb victims.

Occasionally, Dad came to see us at Sandhall and Mum often went to Hull at weekends. Mr. Scholfield usually drove her to the bus stop at Howden but on one occasion she walked there. When she reached Hailgate, Gordia and Gilti appeared, chasing each other along the street. They'd followed her and had to be fetched back home.

We stayed at Sandhall until the autumn of 1942. The house in Aylsford Street had been damaged so we moved again, this time to St. George's Road. I'd missed my father and the familiar streets, and was glad to go back to Chiltern Street School. Hull was still my home, despite the heaps of rubble and food shortages. In the evenings, we watched our bombers flying out from RAF Leconfield, heading for enemy targets. People in uniform were everywhere, including American servicemen.

At St. George's Road, we used the concrete street shelter with other families during the raids. Although the air attacks on Britain diminished after the Germans invaded Russia in June, 1941, the Luftwaffe continued to attack Hull. Apart from being an easy target, the Germans knew that convoys of supplies for Russia sailed from the docks.

After the war, we learned that Hull had earned the dubious distinction of being the second most bombed city in the country after London. Ninety-five per cent of the buildings were damaged or destroyed, including seven churches and fourteen schools. Whole streets were wiped out and 1,185 people were killed in the air raids.

In 1945, restored street lights were welcomed after years of stumbling about in the blackout. On V.E. Day, I went with friends to Queen's Gardens in Hull City Centre to celebrate and we literally danced for joy.

Planners surveyed the ruined city and produced the Abercrombie plan for new schools, transport and businesses. The Prospect Street shopping Centre was built on the site of the old infirmary, and many historical buildings in the Old Town have been restored.

Mum kept in touch with Mr and Mrs Sedgewick and Isabel. Isabel, who was a Christian Scientist, once asked us to look after the Hall for a week while she went with the Scholfields to a Christian Science event in London. She also came to my wedding in 1952, when she was working for Lord and Lady Swinton at Masham.

A few years ago, my daughter and her husband bought a house at Howden and then I decided to come and live here too. In a strange way, I feel as if I've come full circle.

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'Notes on a Small Town'*

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