

*Atworth*  
*A People's History*



Memories of a Wartime Evacuee  
by Kathleen Parsons



## *Introduction*



Almost seventy years ago when the Second World War was about to begin, and knowing that enemy planes would drop bombs on our country, the Government had made plans for children who lived in many of the large cities to be sent to the safety of the countryside. This plan was named '**Operation Pied Piper**' and began on September 1<sup>st</sup> 1939 when one and a quarter million people, mainly children, were relocated.

People who wanted to send their sons and daughters from danger registered the names with the child's school. Parents were sent a list of items the children had to take with them. This included – 2 of each item of undergarments and 2 pairs of socks. For boys, pyjamas, trousers, shirts and pullover. For girls, nightdresses, slips, blouses, frocks and cardigan. Each child should have a warm coat, 2 pairs of boots or shoes, 6 handkerchiefs, face flannel, toothbrush, 2 towels and a comb. Parents were also asked to ensure that each child had enough food for one days travelling.

Childs Gas Mask.



Having arranged through the school which child should be evacuated '**Operation Pied Piper**' began on Friday September 1<sup>st</sup> 1939. On that day the children all had a brown luggage label attached to them giving name and address and each carried a

small suitcase or bag and a gas mask. The children were taken to assembly points where teachers took charge of them. It must have been a sad time for many children parting from their parents and not knowing when they would see them again. However for some it was an adventure, as none knew where they were going. Most children travelled by train, others by coach or bus to unknown places and people.





# *'Atworth - A People's History'*



An account of a London family during World War 11



My sincere thanks to all those who contributed personal accounts  
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&

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## *The Blitz*

The Blitzkrieg, the German word for lightning, known in Britain as 'The Blitz' began on September 7<sup>th</sup> 1940 when the German Air Force, the 'Luftwaffe', bombed London for fifty-seven consecutive nights. During twenty-four nights 5,300 tons of explosives was dropped on London. Other industrial and military cities were also subjected to heavy air raids including my own city of Bristol in the West Country. These attacks lasted for eight months in which time 43,000 civilians were killed, half of these in London and in that city alone one million houses was damaged or destroyed.



"Children of an eastern suburb of London, who have been made homeless by the random bombs of the Nazi night raiders, waiting outside the wreckage of what was their home." September 1940." Photograph - The National Archives.

The Blitz was intended to force Britain into surrendering thereby allowing Germany to invade our country. But the British bull-dog spirit and the rousing speeches made by Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, kept us determined not to give in.

People came together as never before – throughout the country civilians, unable to serve in the military, became members of the 'Home Guard', the 'Auxiliary Fire Service' and other organizations. Lads, too young to serve in the armed forces, were drafted to work 'down the mines' replacing coalminers who were in the fighting force. These were known as 'Bevin Boys'.

Corrugated steel shelters were provided to those with gardens. These were small hut-like constructions, which were covered with earth. They proved to be cold and damp and totally inadequate. In my home when the drone of aircraft was heard the dining table was



pulled up to the chimney-breast and we huddled under it. The chimney-breast and under the stairs were considered the safest place in a house.



When bombs began to fall on London it became imperative that people had some refuge during the night. With little shelter available gradually people began to go to the underground. Soon sixty thousand Londoners went to a tube station each night sleeping side by side on the platforms.

Throughout the war a 'Blackout' was imposed. At night street lights went out and all windows were covered so that enemy aircraft could not use the lights as targets. Air Raid Wardens patrolled the streets and if a glimmer of light could be seen from anyone's property the cry "Put that light out" was clearly heard.





## *Children who came to Atworth.*

From an entry made in the School Log Book dated September 1939 (see photograph below) we are fortunate to discover the number of children who came from London to Atworth.

The entry reads –

“Sept. Opened school today nine days later than anticipated on account of the outbreak of war.

The numbers on roll today are made up as follows:-

Atworth Children 76

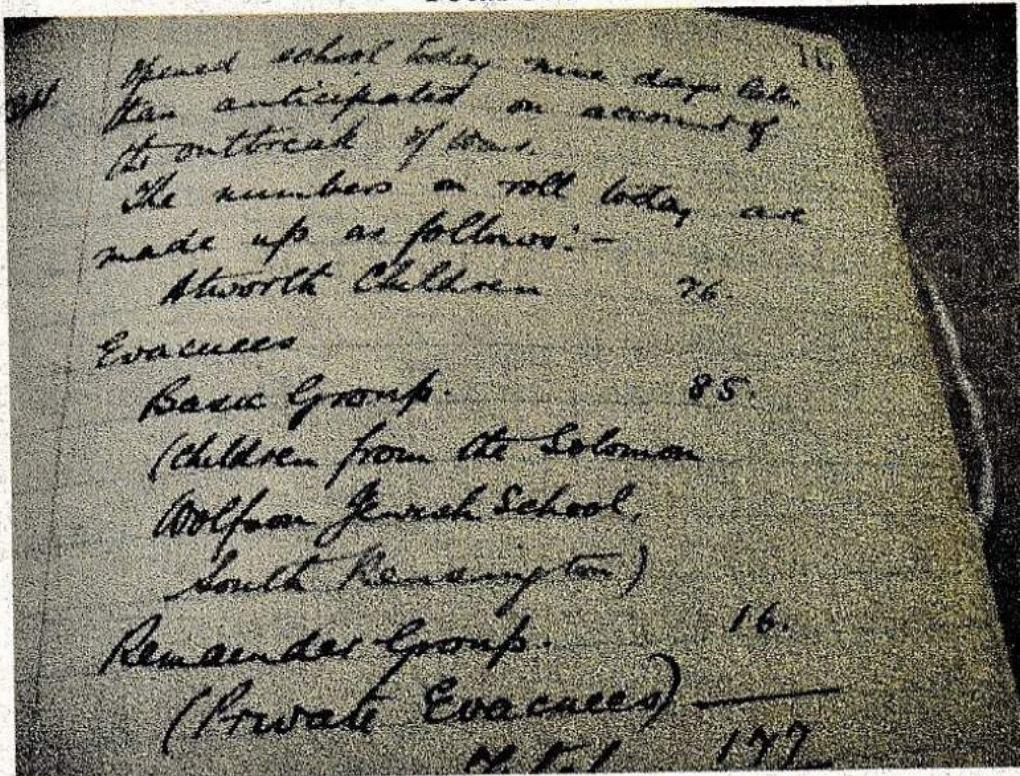
Evacuees

Basic Group 85

(Children from the Solomon Wolfson Jewish School,  
South Kensington)

Remainder Group 16 (Private Evacuees)

Total 177”




The entry continues – “The Church Hall is now being used to accommodate 2 classes and there are 114 children in the school building and 63 in the Church....” (See photograph next page)



*The Church Hall is now being used  
to accommodate 2 classes  
and there are 114 children in the  
school building and 63 in the Church*

We know that teachers had escorted the Jewish children from their school in Kensington and that the Church Hall, then a corrugated iron construction, had been set-aside as schoolrooms. Sixteen children from the East End of London were also in the party and these took lessons in the school.

From a report printed in the newspaper 'Wiltshire Times' of September 1939 you will read an account about the children who were welcomed to Atworth. There are also photographs of evacuees arriving at Trowbridge Railway Station. You will note that most of the children carried their belongings in a bag or even tied up in a bundle. However, all had a box containing a gas mask slung over their shoulders.



DRONKLEY'S

**Wiltshire Times**

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER

## TROWBRIDGE EVACUATION PICTURE



EVACUATED FROM LONDON.—Above: The scene at Trowbridge Railway Station on Friday when several hundred schoolchildren arrived to be billeted in the district.

Right: A close up of the happy youngsters—complete with gas masks and labels.





Children arriving at Trowbridge Station

### *Atworth - From Town to Country*



Last Saturday about 250 Jewish children from North Kensington left London for an unknown destination. Anxiously they watched the stations flash by, wondering where that destination was to be, and it proved to be Melksham. Here they were received with the utmost courtesy. Boy Scouts and helpers rendered every assistance and conducted them to St. Michael's School Hall where a much-appreciated meal was awaiting them. But this was not to be their destination, for after the distribution of two days rations buses arrived and conducted them to the surrounding villages of Holt, Broughton Gifford and Atworth.

At Atworth the kindness of all was amazing, children were willingly taken into homes and it was easy to see from the faces of all that they were thoroughly happy. None could be persuaded to express a wish to return to London.



Country conditions were certainly strange at first, but now all have settled down and made friends with the village children and are enjoying walks, games, and exploring the countryside before work begins in earnest next week.

All from London would like to express their gratitude to the Rev. O. R. Eurich, Chief Billeting Officer, and his lady helpers, Mesdames Baker, Price, Pearce and Burry, who so kindly helped in the evacuation. Mention should also be made of Mr. T.W. Hobday, the Headmaster and his staff, and the whole village for a welcome that will never be forgotten.

Atworth is one of very few villages that can boast of an Institute containing baths, games etc. and a recreation field 6½ acres in extent, including a children's enclosure with a number of amusements, the latest being a revolving platform which was erected a fortnight ago at a cost of £35.

Great credit is due to the Parish Council and the Institute Committee combined for their splendid efforts in this direction.



Wiltshire Times September 1939.

### *Evacuee Missing*

One of the evacuees billeted in this village has been missing since 1.30 p.m. on Wednesday. He is a 13 years-old boy, named Stanley Ramsbottom and his home address is 199, Latimer Road, Edmonton, London.

The description of the boy is – 5ft. 8ins. in height, tan complexion, black hair, wearing a sports coat, and flannel trousers, a navy mackintosh, and carrying a gas mask. He is probably riding a light roadster cycle which has a new rear wheel.”



Wiltshire Times September 9<sup>th</sup> 1939



## *Kathleen's Story*



### Recollections of World War 11. How it affected the family.

At the outbreak of World War 11 in 1939 I and my sister, May, Valerie and John were on holiday at Poplar Farm, Atworth, near Bath, owned by my cousins, Bessie and Sidney Rawlings. Valerie was 6 years old and John 18 months. Owing to the peculiar working hours pertaining to his work as bus driver, Guy, my husband, was unable to be with us. It had been pre-arranged with my cousins that in the event of war the children and I would go to the farm for the duration as there was little doubt that the cities would be bombed. Therefore, when this happened, I stayed on the farm and bade a tearful farewell to my sister who returned home to Welling to be with my mum and dad.



Left to right - Back row Sidney Rawlings, Neville Evans  
Middle row Penelope Evans, Helena with cat  
Front Row, sitting in wheelbarrow - John & Valerie Parsons



It was thought that the Germans would use gas and everyone was issued with a gas mask (the children's were in the shape of Mickey Mouse!), which we had to carry in a box wherever we went. Fortunately, gas was not used. To conserve food supplies and to



ensure that everyone was reasonably well fed, ration books were issued. A small allowance per person was made by the Government to assist living expenses

Child's Rationing Book.

A siren was sounded as an air-raid warning. Two high pitch alternating notes for an "alert" and a clear, consistent note for the "all clear". Atworth had several of these alerts during the first year and in the early days when there was a warning we all went down into the cellar underneath the house. My cousins had made straw palliasses for us to sit on and we spent many uncomfortable nights in this situation until the "all clear" sounded. Endless games of "I spy" and other word games were played in the glow of candles. However, eventually it was decided that the living room with its shuttered windows would be safe enough and so we gathered there in front of a lovely warm log fire. The living room at the farm was spacious.

On entering the room there was a double window on the right facing the road and another double window facing the door. These windows had heavy wooden shutters which formed the black-out and during the raids on Bath and the subsequent bombing of Coventry, these shutters shook with the vibration as the German planes flew over the house at regular intervals and the bombs were dropped one by one. It was a frightening experience.

These raids on Bath, nine miles away, were the nearest Atworth had to a bombing raid and were on two consecutive nights.

It wasn't easy to settle down as an "evacuee" instead of a holidaymaker. My cousins had three children, all-older than my two, so initially there were eight of us. Apart from caring for Valerie and John, I began to assist with the household chores but my cousin



Bessie did all the shopping and cooking. She held all the ration books. We were marvellously well fed. How she managed I do not know and I never heard her grumble or complain. She deserved a medal.

As time went by I took a more active part in the village life and began a weekly collection for National Savings and, from time to time, helped organise events to raise funds for the War effort. Hundreds of pounds passed through my hands to add to the thousands collected over the area we represented. My cousin loaned me her bicycle to enable me to get around the village.

There was a piano at the farm and having a minimal knowledge of that instrument I began to play the morale-boosting songs of the day and the children would stand around and sing whilst Jim, the eldest of the children, would strum away on his guitar! With the exception of John, the children attended school daily, Jim and May at Bradford-on-Avon Grammar School five miles away (they cycled to and fro), Reen (Doreen) at a private school nearby and Valerie attended the village school. In the evenings, after school homework was completed the children would play cards and board games and when they had gone to bed we adults played darts.

By this time the bombing of London and the suburbs had begun and children were sent by bus and train out of the cities and towns to people who were willing to give them temporary homes. I wept when I saw those who came to Atworth under this scheme. Some stayed, others returned home.

The next to arrive at the farm was my cousin Dorothy Morris and her two children, Ann and Brian. Their house in Blackheath had been bombed and was unfit to live in. It was subsequently demolished and rebuilt. This increased our number to 11. Other members of Dorothy's family began to arrive and places were found in the village for them to stay.

As and when occasion presented itself, Guy and Dorothy's husband Ken managed to visit and we heard from them of the



bombing raids. There was much letter-writing to be done to keep in touch with my family at home.



Kathleen Parsons

Left to right – Helena Rawlings, Doreen Hayward, Doreen Rawlings,  
Front Row –

Valerie Parsons, Brian Morris, Barbara Stickland & An Morris

While I lead a comparatively comfortable life (I was spoilt by kindness) it was not so for my cousins as, apart from caring for the extended family, they were up at 5'30 each morning to attend to the farmwork. Cows had to be milked, chicken and ducks fed, eggs collected and the seasonal harvesting of hay, wheat etc. from the fields surrounding the house. Wild rabbits were shot, mushrooms picked, chickens and ducks were often hanging in the out-house for family consumption (although, to this day I've never eaten any!) which all helped to eke out the rations. There were weekly markets at Trowbridge (Tuesday) and Devizes (Thursday) to be attended. Sometimes during school holidays we went with my cousins and we were able to do some window-shopping. It was all go from morning to night.





Valerie Parsons & Tinker



Three of four years passed in this manner and then I received an urgent recall home as my father had to undergo major surgery. It was the start of the flying bomb period and so it wasn't safe for the children to return to Welling. It was too much to expect of my cousin Bessie to look after Valerie and John in my absence and so they were taken to my favourite aunt's at Purton, near Swindon. I was heartbroken but the children didn't seem to mind. They didn't realise the dangerous situation. Once home, life for me became very hectic.

It was a very emotional home-coming being with the family again and missing the children very much. I again expressed my feelings when I entered 76, Welling Way. All mirrors and pictures had been taken off the walls and all furniture with a polished surface had been turned face to the walls to preserve them, if possible, from damage as the flying bombs were coming over thick and fast. A reinforced brick air-raid shelter to accommodate four persons had been built in the garden and it was in that shelter that Guy and I slept every night. In the morning the bed covers were wet with condensation.

The flying bombs were missiles that could be seen and provided you saw them you were safe (!! ) but when the flying bomb period ended the V2 missiles began to arrive. These just exploded without warning and made one jump out of one's skin. It was heartbreaking to see the mass of rubble where once stood residential homes. It was one of these flying bombs, which dropped further up the road from our house that took out all the glass from our windows and brought down the ceilings in several rooms. Council workmen soon came to board up the windows only to have them blown out again the following night. We were just thankful to escape with our lives.

The reason for my home-coming was to assist my father (Fred Emby) during his illness. My grandfather (Arthur Flack) who ran a removal business had died and my father was left in charge to clear up the estate. My father wanted me to take over whilst he was in hospital. This was no mean task as I hadn't been working since I married and I knew practically nothing about the business. However, the little knowledge I had gained at commercial collage some 15/16 years earlier stood me in good stead and I managed to cope, at the





Left to right - Valerie Parsons, Muriel Webb,  
Helena Rawlings, Mary Rudman & Ann Williams.





same time dodging the flying bombs. My father's operation was more serious than we had at first thought and terminal cancer was diagnosed. He was unable to work again and died in 1947. I carried on and managed to bring my grandfather's business to a satisfactory conclusion.

It was nearing the end of the War that we had an unexpected visitor – our GI cousin Fred Telling from Cleveland, USA. He looked in at odd intervals and took a meal with us, such as it was as we were still rationed. He came on victory over Europe (VE) Day and persuaded my sister and I to go to London with him to see the King and Queen and Winston Churchill on the balcony of Buckingham Palace receive a rapturous victory celebration from the people. The crowds were horrific but even greater on Victory over Japan (VJ) Day when we, Guy and I and the children, (they had returned home as soon as VE was declared) paid another visit to join in the celebrations. We nearly got crushed in the stampede to get to the front of the Palace. Our cousin had returned home to the States by this time. Thankfully, we were once more a united family.



About the time spent in Atworth Valerie recalled – “At school we were on the evacuees register. My memories are of sunny days sitting around the school pond watching the dragonflies while doing our lessons. I talked too much and had to do lines.”

Memories of life on the farm – “I helped Auntie Bessie make the butter pats, slicing and salting the beans and putting them into the crocks, picking mushrooms and slicing them for Uncle Sidney's breakfast. During the harvest we helped stack the wheat into stooks and in doing so had prickles all up our arms. I remember we all knitted scarves, mittens and socks for the soldiers, sailors and airmen.”

