

Evacuation to Fakenham.

My father, Edwin Mason, was born in Wood Norton, where his parents kept the Post Office/village shop. He was educated at the Norwich Boys' Grammar School and Downing College, Cambridge. After teacher training, he gained a post at the Central Foundation School for Boys and was teaching chemistry there when the school was evacuated to Fakenham.

As a local man, it was decided that he should work on billeting liaison, in addition to his teaching duties. This was no easy task as many of the boys were Jewish and came from orthodox families, some being children of refugees who had left Germany for Britain during the pre-war rise of the Nazi regime. Some flexibility was needed if the London boys were to be settled with their Fakenham host families. I remember my father speaking about two cases in particular.

Two boys, brothers, were offered a billet by a Miss Perowne in her comfortable house on the condition they attended Fakenham Church with her on Sunday mornings as she would not consider leaving them in the house alone. Father contacted the parents and suggested that it was in the boy's best interest that they agreed. They did so, and the boys attended church with Miss Perowne thereafter.

One boy was billeted with a senior police officer and his wife. They took great pride in "their boy's" ability, particularly when he won a state scholarship. The relationship between them remained close after the war had ended. Most boys were well treated by their host families, but a few were resented as a burden.

My family life in Fakenham.

My father arrived in Fakenham with the school and had digs with Mr and Mrs Fox. Mr Fox was a dentist with a surgery in the centre of town. When my mother and I (born April 1938) joined him we had rooms with Mrs Kathleen Grint, having previously lived with Mr and Mrs (Billy) Middleton, and their two children, Pat and Neville. My earliest memory is of sitting in my pram watching my mother and Mrs Middleton pick runner beans from rows held up by tall strings on the Middleton's allotment. This was land on the side of the railway embankment.

Our family then had the chance of half a house on, I think, Sandy Lane. The house was shared with Padre Smith, his wife and little boy. Padre Smith was Padre to Raynham and Sculthorpe airfields, and I have a clear memory of running down the back garden with my mother and the Smiths to watch some of the aircraft return from operations. My first experience of school was in the kindergarten run by Miss Macanelly (I do not know if I have spelt her name correctly) who lived with members of her family and ran the kindergarten in part of their house..

Robin Bradley, son of Dr Bradley, and David Coote(?), son of a Fakenham bank manager, also attended and several other children, including Susan Dring, a child of the house. In the fine weather we played in the garden; and in the wet weather we played in a large outbuilding full of toys, including a fine rocking horse.

I am sorry to say that on one occasion when David was on the horse, Robin and I rocked it so hard that David slid off backwards and got stuck in a basket full of balls!

We were taught letters and numbers and simple poems and stories. I remember having to recite "There are fairies at the bottom of the garden", suitably dressed. I certainly enjoyed my mornings there.

Toys were hard to come by, but a shop in the town sold Beatrix Potter which I loved. My parents bought many of them for me there, some of which I still have. I did have one doll with a china head, but unfortunately this was smashed when I collided with the L shaped brick screen that was built to protect the front door from bomb blast. Many houses had those screens. A favourite paddling place in the summer was in the stream at Hempton (except for the time when I cut my foot on a tin can).

My father was an active member of the Home Guard and was made a second lieutenant in spite of having no previous military experience. He wore brown boots which were highly polished. I think he enjoyed the various exercises and training sessions. Although not all of them went to plan. At a time of heightened fear of invasion the Home Guard had a vantage point on top of the church tower. Climbing the church tower stairs to check the sentry, my father was correctly challenged and made the reply identifying himself. When he reached the top he discovered that the safety catch on the sentry's weapon was off... but he lived to tell the tale!

On another occasion, a group of regular soldiers came to demonstrate a small field gun for the Fakenham Home Guard in a nearby hall. The Home Guard stood with their backs to the side walls, the gun was set up and a round fired. Some mistake must have been made, as the round hit the tortoise stove at the other end of the hall and carried it through the wall, over a low hedge and into a field, leaving a smoking hole!

Much of the training was very useful, father used to say, but some was pure "Dad's Army". I remember going with my mother to join the crowd watching the Church Parade in the town centre. Father stayed with parade which always ended in the Crown!

By the later stages of the war my mother and I were back in our house in North West London. There had been little or no bombing in that part of London up to that time, and the government was taking over empty houses to re house people who had been bombed out, with no promise of when the owners could have them back. My father stayed with the school in Fakenham, coming home to us at half term or part of the school holiday time when he could be spared. During term time CFS and Fakenham Grammar School shared premises and in the holidays not all the boys went back to their London families. The organisation required to keep both schools running smoothly must have been considerable, and for the CFS staff this extended into the holidays, when extra activities such as football matches were arranged for boys who had remained in Fakenham. Mr Dan Broady, the butcher, was a friend of my father's and a piece of Dan's meat (or, on one occasion a pheasant) came with father in his suitcase – this was illegal, but it was a great treat for us.

We were permanently reunited as a family when the Central Foundation School returned to Cowper Street after the war ended.

Elizabeth Turner