

11th Oct 2012

Please find enclosed a copy of my Dad's memories of Downham.

Dad was born a "townie" - but after his time in Downham - he became a country boy at heart for the rest of his life.

His love of nature, the great outdoors, country pursuits and the country air left a mark on him which he transferred to us his family. He became an avid fisherman and recalled how he was taught to tickle trout in the village brook at Downham. He told about his exploits building "bogies" - we would perhaps call them go-carts - which the children then rode down the hill in the village (without brakes he would hasten to add) - he always had a bandage on his knees!! We have several photos of him as a child with such bandages!!

I believe he re-visited Downham with my mother when I was a baby - perhaps in 1953/54 and saw the Coulston family then.

Also - my mother (who is still alive) recalls that Isabella Coulston once came to visit Dad and his parents in Stalybridge where some of our family still live today.

I hope that your history group enjoy reading his memoirs of his time in Downham, and I would love to know if anyone has other accounts or photos of this time in the village history. We have no photos of Dad at Downham and wonder if any were taken of the evacuees?

I have enclosed a few photos - some of which would be when Dad was approx 9 to 10 years old and what he would have looked like when at Downham.

I had a wonderful day last Sunday taking photos of the village in the beautiful autumn sunshine and know that Dad would have loved to be there again.

Best wishes,

Pam Hemmings

Memories of Evacuation

On the day of the outbreak of World War II. I was aged 9 yrs and 10 mths. and I attended the Ravensbury Street Junior School in Clayton. Manchester.

On the day the evacuation of children took place (it was a few days before or after war was declared), a large group of children gathered at school- for the evacuation was organised on an individual basis- the group was to be under the care of several teachers who were to be evacuated with us, and a small, number of volunteer mothers who would assist the teachers during travel to our destination, and the subsequent allocation of children into individual homes. My mother was one of these volunteers and I remember my mother telling me afterwards that they were under strict instructions that they would NOT have any, individual contact with their own children, either during the Journey or the allocation of homes at the destination. Once their work caring for the group of children as a whole was completed they were to be allowed to say goodbye and then leave immediately to return to Manchester.

Although we children were not concerned our destination was to be Clitheroe, a rural market town in North Lancashire and a few surrounding villages. The logistics of the journey are worth considering at this point :-

Our school catered for children between the ages of 6 to 11 years, so children as young as six were being evacuated without contact with their mothers. I certainly remember small children clinging to the hands of older brothers or sisters. The, volunteer mothers paid particular attention to these small, children. My age group was the second oldest in the school. ,

Each child was provided with a "Ration. Book", an "Identity Card" and matching "Tag" tied around the neck. And a "Gas Mask," Most children had a letter from their parents addressed to ;the "Kind person who would provide a home at the other end," All had a bag or suitcase containing their belongings, Food rations for the journey were issued to each child.

We all met very early. for our day was to be an extremely long. tiring and emotional experience. Amid many tearful scenes we set off by Buses from Clayton to Manchester's Victoria Railway Station - a distance of, about 5 kilometres. There, on Platform 11 (I think), we boarded a train to Clitheroe. a journey of several hours. with many stops and starts. I recall that the train had single compartments and no toilets. so children frequently had to leave the train at stations along the way.

Upon arrival in Clitheroe a large number of the children were counted-off at random to be marched to the Town Hall, where they would be "selected" by prospective hosts. Those of us who were left continued by Bus, first to a small village called Chatburn, some 5km north east of Clitheroe, we were then divided into two groups, at random, and without any consideration whatsoever towards friends, etc. Here the first group departed. My group continued on for another 3-4km. to our final destination, an even smaller village called Downham.

I recall that our group had about 15 members. under the care of one of our teachers. Miss Anne Mather, and one or two of the volunteer mothers. one of whom happened, fortunately, to be my own, who were to accompany us' to our destination, Downham Village School. By now it was late afternoon. we were hungry. and some of the youngest among us were very distressed and bewildered.

At the school, which was a small building with one room, we were taken into the centre of the room where we were surrounded by a circle of prospective hosts. Most of these people were either farmers or estate workers from the nearby manor house, DOWNHAM HALL. What followed was clearly not done at random. Children were selected one by one and left the circle to stand with the people who had chosen them. After a while just a few children were left unchosen and the onlookers were further encouraged by our teacher and the official in charge. Finally just 2 children were left unchosen , a', frail, poorly dressed boy younger than myself, holding ,the hand, of his- even younger sister, who was crying. "

A farmer, who told our teachers that he had hoped for 2 sturdy , boys to work on the farm, took the two children. Many years later when, discussing the, events of that 'day with my mother she told me that what took place at the schoolroom greatly distressed her, especally so, as she was not allowed to speak or make herself known as my mother.

For my part, although I was lucky to be one of the first few chosen, I have to say that it upset me .at the time, for as young as I was, I felt greatly for the children who were amongst the last to be selected. I am happy to say, however, that the brother and sister thrived on the farm, and were quite clearly happy and having a wonderful time amongst loving people.

Although that day was a traumatic experience which I have never forgotten, I do not intend to be critical of the way it was handled. If you consider the enormity of the task in hand, and if you realise that things then were not as they are now, with few resources to call upon, the objective was realised by the tremendous co-operation and good will of all involved.

My guardians were Mr & Mrs Coulston and their 3 children (2 boys and a girl). They also took a second boy, younger than me. Mr Coulston was the chauffeur to Lord and Lady Assheton of the Manor House. Their house was a large end terraced cottage at the top of the village with a farm and pub close by. I recall that the village stocks were easily visible from the room which I shared with the three other boys in the house. As an only child, and used to my own room, I remember that these arrangements represented quite a change for me.

The Coulstons were kind people who looked after us very well. The three children accepted the evacuees very well, although it must have been quite a shock for the one girl, Isabelle, to have been surrounded by four boys! I can recall that she kept very much to herself. and I don't blame her for that.

So far as life in Downham was concerned, my only memories are happy ones, although I naturally worried about my parents and the air raids in Manchester. The arrival of 15 children in tiny Village School doubled the number of pupils normally attending. Arrangements were that the children were split into two groups, a young group, and an older group, who were then taught by the existing teacher and our own teacher, Miss Mather, respectively. I was lucky **enough**- to be' in 'Miss Mather's class, in that she had been my class teacher back in Manchester. She provided a continuity for me which proved invaluable later on when I took my 11+ examination for High School.

I recall a Scout Group in the village where I learned much about country life and enjoyed camping and walking in the countryside. This began a love of the countryside which has lasted until this day (particularly now that I am retired).

At the Manor House several evacuees were billeted and looked after by the domestic staff. Sometimes a group of us would be invited to visit them in the huge kitchen at the hall for a meal.

About once each month my mother and father would come to see me. I can remember that on those occasions. I was so happy, but it seemed to me that no sooner had they arrived, than they would have to leave to start the long journey back to Manchester. Of course this made me unhappy, but sometimes my dad would be able to give me some extra pocket money and this cheered me up no end!!

Here I should explain that I had no idea how my bed and board was paid for, but I presume that there must have been an arrangement between my parents and the Coulstons, certainly .I can recall that I got a little spending money from the Coulstons each week. and in those days 6d. was quite a lot of money, today it would be worth 2.5p. Then you could buy 2 ounce bar of Cadbury's chocolate for 1d, or a comic for 2d.

Gradually, over the months. children began to leave the village to return home. This was for various reasons but of course, some were homesick and couldn't settle. The other evacuee in the Coulston house left during this period. My time to leave came about in November 1940 after I had been in Downham for 14 months. My leaving was for a special reason. The three Coulston children all caught Chicken Pox. I didn't however, as I had had it before. With three sick children to care for, Mrs. Coulston felt that it would be a good idea for me to go home until they got better. However, as later events unfolded, I was never to return to Downham.

Upon coming home I returned to my school which had reopened although many children and teachers were still evacuated.

Now was my introduction to Air Raids and my mother and I would go to the Anderson Shelter that my father had installed in the back garden. People without gardens were provided with Morrison Shelters, which were like a large reinforced table, housed indoors, which a family would lie under during raids.,

At this time my father had become a Policeman and he would return to duty immediately the air raid siren sounded. If the siren sounded in the daytime, we children at school would go into the cellars, 'and our teachers would continue with lessons down there. We could often hear the sound of bombs falling, and always we could hear the anti-aircraft guns sited on a nearby railway line firing.

At Christmas time in 1940. when I had been home for 1 month, the Manchester Blitz began and this lasted for several days and nights. During this time. we lived full time in our air-raid shelter with my mother dashing into the house for food. My father appeared at rare intervals to check that we were alright, then returned to duty. My abiding memory of this time was how cold and damp we were in the garden shelter during that winter. Of course, my parents had done their best to make the shelter habitable with bunk-beds and many blankets and hot water bottles. Heating appliances were not possible because of fumes and dampness."

During the blitz, much damage was caused to all sorts of property around where we lived and many people had sad stories of relatives and friends. A local football ground called - "The Dingle" was about 100 yds from my house and it was used as a dump for a lot of the bomb-damaged masonry. bricks and building debris from the blitzed area of Manchester. Everybody knew somebody who had been "bombed out", as it was called.

For two days, my aunt and her two children had to stay with us until the army defused the large unexploded mine which had fallen near their house. It was around this time that my mother and I inadvertently walked around an army road block and came across an unexploded mine resting by its parachute across the trolley bus wire on Ashton New Road. Clayton.

I recall that the army crew who diffused the land mine were well entertained in a nearby pub 'by the local people whose houses they had saved.

One of our favourite Games, between Air raids, was collecting shrapnel and everyone had specimens of either bomb nose caps, or anti-aircraft nose caps.

Next, to the football ground was an RAF Barrage Balloon Unit. and more Anti-Aircraft guns. This was because the area, was surrounded by strategic points targeted by the Germans.

Although air-raids over Manchester continued until the end of the war in 1945. they were never again at the same intensity as they were during the December of 1940.

It was after the Blitz that my parents decided, that since we had survived such a period together, we would not separate, so I did, not return to Downham. Life slowly returned to something near; normality. It was during this period, during a sneak early morning raid, that a bomb was dropped on a row of terraced houses in Bank Street, Clayton. which was next to our school playground. Several children from our school were killed as they were getting ready for school.

Later in the Spring of 1941. I successfully sat a scholarship -Grammar School exam. The journey to school meant walking across the centre of Manchester each day, and during these journeys, I saw many sights of fresh bomb, damage and workmen digging for survivors.

However, children are resilient, most of us thrived on the continuing adventure and excitement. For adults and families with parental responsibilities, those must have been terrifying times.

Alan William Whelan

D.O.B. 20.11.1929

Died 14.09.2009

