

Archived by Wheathampstead
History Society from the website
compiled by the late Brian Joyce.

Memories in wartime.

by Rita Cobb

A child's view of food

I was five when the war broke out. We lived in Wheathampstead. Marford Road was then called Hatfield Road.

For **breakfast** we usually had porridge made with water, so it was quite runny. We had sugar and milk on it, sometimes for a treat golden syrup. For **Sunday breakfast** there were often fritters. Occasionally Spam fritters, delicious. My mother usually made a **Sunday roast** with Bisto gravy and vegetables, potatoes and peas out of the garden, in season. This meat was served cold on Mondays (Washday) and spread through the rest of the week as stew. For **Sunday dessert** (afters) it was a pudding, Spotted Dick with sultanas or dates and custard. Other times we had steamed jam pudding, treacle tart, or fruit tart when fruit was in season. There was also junket. We kept chickens so we had an egg each for breakfast at times. When a hen was past laying eggs we had it boiled. Every scrap of food had to be eaten up. Meat had fat and gristle. Pork fat was lovely but beef fat was horrid. Mum made bacon suet roll for Dinner sometimes. We drank tea. At five o'clock we had **afternoon tea**. We ate jam or paste (meat or fish) sandwiches. On Sundays Mum made jam tarts (very hard through lack of fat) or biscuits and sometimes a cake. Biscuits from the shop were similar to digestive but less tasty, cake was plain like Madeira. **At night** we had cocoa made with water, milk and sugar added. When we ran out of sugar we had saccharine.

When we were hungry, during the day, if they were available, we would have sugar or condensed milk sandwiches, also lard or dripping with salt sandwiches. We could not have both butter and jam on the same piece of bread. At our friend's **birthday parties**, or ours the fare was paste or jam sandwiches, biscuits, jelly and a birthday cake. For us a fruitcake was better than plain.

Christmas, Mum made the Christmas pudding at the beginning of December. We helped stir it. She used real suet from **Mr Ball, the butcher** and amongst the dried fruit, there were plenty of grated carrots. We always had **chicken for Christmas dinner**, usually one of our own cockerels. (Then cold the next day then stew for several days – delicious) Tinned fruit was rare but Gran always managed to get a tin of peaches for her party. This was served with evaporated milk.

At **Easter**, Mum made marzipan from Soya flour, sugar and cocoa, so that we had Easter Eggs. It did not taste all that good but we appreciated her efforts.

School dinners were often mince, just plain no herbs. Cabbage was a dark green and flat. Potatoes at the end of the season had black 'eyes' in them, which we had to eat. **Desserts** were milk puddings, semolina, sago and tapioca. (I did not like any of them). We could bring in '**Corona**' (these were brightly coloured sugary fizzy drinks) and share them with our friends. The favourite and most expensive was **Tizer**. These were on sale in the village.

Early Wartime Memories

I started at the village school when I was four and a half. I was just over five when War broke out. The order of events at that time is unclear. My father joined the RAF during the summer of 1939. He wanted to be a volunteer rather than a conscript.

We were sitting in the "Babies" i.e. Reception Class, when we all were given **gas masks**. We were told that we had to carry these at all times. They were in cardboard boxes, which had a cord (?) that went across us. We tried them on. They smelt horrible, a nasty rubbery smell and you could hardly breathe in them. My sister had a black one like me. My brother being two years old had a "**Mickey Mouse**" one. His was much more fun. It was red and when breathing in it, you could make raspberry noises. When my baby sister was born, my mother was told that if there was gas she was to put the baby in a drawer. Eventually there was this ugly **cradle gas mask** for the baby.

The first time I knew of **air-raid warnings** at school, we had to sit in the Infants cloakroom. This was a gloomy, narrow room with a window at the far end. We were told by our teacher to stay away from the windows, because if a bomb dropped, the blast would shatter the glass all over us.

At that time, at home, my mother and other Mums got together and made **blackout curtains**. Also she was sticking **paper crosses** on each windowpane against shattering glass. Mum soon got fed up with this and we went back to clear panes. At the beginning, Dad started to dig an air-raid shelter at the top of our garden. He got down about a foot and Mum came up and said she would not go in it. So he filled it in again.

My Granddad **dug a shelter** and when my sister and I were staying with him and Grandma, we had to get up in the middle of the night and go down these damp steps in the pitch-dark into this hole in the ground. You must not show a light. It was not pleasant.

Our village was only five miles from **de Havillands and other aircraft factories**, so at the beginning **bombs** were dropped in our area.

At home, when the first **sirens** went at night, Mum would usher us **under the stairs**. Over time, we then went into the hallway (one small window). Later still, she left us all sleeping and lay worrying herself as to which one of us she would grab first if the bombs fell.

EVACUEES (page 1)

Notes from School Logbooks:

1939 September 1

6.30 pm 231 children and 15 staff of the Argyle Senior, Mixed Infants from King's Cross arrived at St Helens. Headmaster Mr Barnes.

Mr Housden, Headmaster Miss Young and Miss Warren (Staff) were there. Also Inspector Birkett. Tea was provided and billets arranged.

September 2

9 am Convoy of mothers and children under school age arrived. Schools again used. Much work done by aforementioned staff

12.30pm Two bus loads of expectant mothers arrived without notice. Increased efforts to find accommodation

6 pm All evacuees billeted. Working mornings only

Dec 4th

Full-time school commenced. 8.55 – 12, 1.25 – 3.45.

1940 May 10th

The German Invasion of Holland and Belgium.

May 17th Gas mask inspection

EVACUEES (page 2)

My memories of the Coming (by Rita Cobb)

We were taken from the Infants (Miss Warren) into a large classroom, which was separated from the Infants (Miss Young) by a full wall partition. We were told that the evacuees were here. We had no idea what was going on or what evacuees were. Then they were having lessons. I can remember great chaos. So many children. I do not know whether this was at the time mentioned in the log books, if so I was 5 years old.

Eventually other children joined our class. Some were rough but we had quite a few rough children in our school anyway. We were used to a very mixed school.

Several children in our road, Marford Road were evacuees. Some of them did not come down with the school group as they had relatives here. Our next door neighbours were both in the forces (Army and Land Army) so we had a family from Brockley. Later on there were families from Folkestone. As far as I could see they became a part of the children's group. There were quite a few of us in Marford.

Regards Rita Cobb

February 2009