

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

St HELEN'S SCHOOL 1937-1946

by **Ron Hewson**

I was born in Wheathampstead in **June 1932** and spent my formative years there leaving in September 1964.*

1937 saw the Coronation of **King George VI**, it was also the year my schooling began at **St Helen's Church of England Elementary School**,** not the place of high achievers in fact looking back it was typical of the education meted out prior to and during the war years, which generally meant those who could were encouraged, those who could get by were left to do just that and if you were not too bright you were forgotten at the bottom of the class.

Lessons consisted mainly of the legendary 3R's none of which I particularly excelled. The two teachers in the infants classes were **Miss Warren** and **Miss Young** both quite competent, **W J (Johnny) Houseden** the Headmaster was a legend in his time but none of the other teachers left a lasting impression. Progression through the school was infants and juniors where hopefully one learned to read and became competent in basic math's or arithmetic as it was known to us, when we were drilled in the times tables by rote. Then on to the senior school when the curriculum was expanded to include wood and metalwork for the boys learning the intricacies of mortise and tenon and dove-tail joints (the teacher was **Mr Willing**) and cookery for girls. In the final year gardening was included when each boy was given a plot to cultivate and the resulting produce finished up as school dinners. The Rector, the **Reverend Baird-Smith** made the odd appearance at the school assembly and also contributed to religious education and after his retirement the **Reverend Rowe** took his place.

1939 saw the outbreak of **WWII** bringing with it **gas masks, identity cards** and **air raid shelters** although the only one that I remember was constructed for the school, I think it was only used once in anger. I don't remember the famous 11 a.m. declaration broadcast by Neville Chamberlain on that fateful Sunday in September but I can vaguely remember the air raid siren wailing. The war was to change social history throughout the world forever adding to the massive changes that had been brought about by WWI.



The immediate changes that affected school children was the influx of **evacuees from London**, they arrived on **double-decker buses** and my over-riding memory was the smell of vinegar, possibly they had fish and chips on the way. Among those who were living in the village were the **Gradleys'** who lived for about three years in **Ely House on The Hill**, there were others whose names escape me now.

The main change for the school was that a **shift system** was adopted, one week the locals attended in the mornings and the evacuees attended in the afternoon, the next week we swapped round, this didn't enhance the education standards for the school. I can't remember how long this arrangement continued, probably not very long.

The first pupil to pass the 11 plus exam (to the best of my knowledge) was a boy by the name of **Bracey** and the Headmaster was so pleased he gave every one a **half day holiday** to celebrate, afterwards there were others who were successful but sadly no time off for us.

The war was an exciting time for children of my age, **soldiers were billeted in the village at Garden House** (no longer there) and paraded in the **station yard, tanks and army lorries** appeared on **Nomansland Common** training for the battles to come.

1940 was the **Battle of Britain** and I remember on a sunny day in September watching a **dog fight between German and British planes** in clear blue skies and saw some **pilots bailing out** from aeroplanes and with others we looked for and found some **spent cannon shells**.

As a family we always made a point of **listening to the radio news** and the items that stick in my mind are the **sinking of HMS Hood** and later the **Prince of Wales** and **Repulse** in the far east. The **fall of Singapore** was a disaster for us because some of the locals who were with the **Beds & Herts Regiment** were taken prisoner. I can remember two local men who were killed in the early part of the war mainly because my parents knew both very well. They were **George Swallow** and **John Rolph**.

Although the war brought its hardships with **rationing of both food and clothing**, I can't remember being short of food particularly as my father had a **kitchen garden** and **two allotments**, I now wonder how he managed to keep them cultivated

because he served in the **first war** and was **gassed twice**, then wounded causing him to **lose a leg** and be **taken prisoner**. Looking back now it must have been a tremendous effort, anyway it kept us in vegetables all the year round. We also kept **chickens** and **rabbits** to supplement our rations with the occasional **pheasant** thrown in.

While still at school for a period I **delivered the morning newspapers** to **Gustard wood** and **Blackmore End**, maybe for about 18 months or more. As part of the school contribution to the war effort we were allowed time off to go **potato picking** (with parents consent) and were paid **six pence an hour** the equivalent of about 2.5 pence decimal not a bad rate for a school boy or girl in the 1940's.

A few **bombs were jettisoned in the area** and apart from a few broken windows didn't cause too much damage. The real damage was done by a **doodlebug** which fell directly on **Bury Farm**. A few incendiary bombs fell during the the blitz and we youngsters looked and found souvenirs quite close to home.

Entertainment consisted of **film shows in the school** when a **Mr Hart** of **St Albans** rigged up a projector in the school hall, the films usually consisted of **westerns** with **Roy Rogers** and **Tom Mix** among the favourites with a few cartoons for good measure. School outings did not happen during the war.

The **Cubs and Scouts, Brownies and Guides** were part of village life for most children at some stage during school years, **Miss Robbins** was the Cub Leader, the Scout Masters name escapes me.

During the five war years there were activities to raise money towards armaments such as **Wings for Victory and Battleship Week**. I remember as part of one of these events (correct me if I'm wrong) **Stars in Battle Dress** entertaining the locals in the school hall when the star of the show was **Charlie Chester** one of the headliners of the music hall, who also had a weekly radio show, and later appeared on television.

Finally the war ended in **1945** and I can remember the **bonfires and fireworks** to celebrate **VE Day** in May but the fighting was still raging in the Far East and continued until **August** when **VJ Day** was announced. Eventually things began to change slowly with the **street lighting back** again and the fear of air raids over.

My contemporaries in the village during my schooldays were **Des Saunders, Philip Fletcher, John Fuller, Roy Chennells, Freddy Bangs, Barry Euinton, Joy Fisher, Barbara Young, Jack Ward, Paramus Webb, June Crawley, Jimmy Fisher, Vida Hebb, Lorna Parsons, Roland Hunt, Colin Saunders** and so the list goes on. Apologies to those left out also to those who are in and would rather not be.

I left school in July **1946**

* My Grandfather and Father were born in Wheathampstead.

** My Father and Sister were pupils at the school.

Regards Ron Hewson

May 2004

Extract of the National Archives concerning my father.

Name & Rank: **Hewson, Arthur**, Private, No 15390. 1st Bedford Regiment

Home address: **The Hill, Wheathampstead**, Herts, Age 26. Platelayer

Place and Date of Capture: La Colette, Near Vimy, 24th April 1917:

I was wounded by shrapnel in left leg in advance about 4.15 am on 23rd April, and lay out in a shell hole unconscious for a day and night. I recovered consciousness next morning about 9 am and crawled out of shell hole and found myself in the middle of the Germans, who, I think were Bavarians. I asked them for something to drink, and they gave me water, and also offered me bread, but I could not eat it. They took me into a dug-out and bound up my leg, and kept me there till the next morning, when I was carried to a dressing station in a tunnel at Lens. There the doctor put my leg in splints, and after about two hours I was taken by motor ambulance to Douai Hospital.

Douai Hosp. April 24th - May 3 1917:

At Douai the doctor, who spoke English and who was kind and attentive, but whose name I do not know, examined my leg and asked my permission to amputate it at once, as poisoning had set in. I agreed, and he operated at once, after giving me an anaesthetic. There were four or five doctors at the hospital, and one of them visited us nearly every day, but did not dress my wound until the day I left after nine days, then only because I asked to have it dressed, as it smelt bad. The food there consisted of soup and some bread and marmalade.

Tournai Hosp. May 3-9 1917:

From Douai I was taken to Tournai Hospital, where I stayed six days, and my wound was not dressed there at all until I was put in the hospital train to go to Duisburg.

Journey. May 9th-11, 1917:

The journey took about 36 hours, and my wound was dressed again in the train, and they said it was going on well.

Duisburg, Res. Laz. May 11 - Sept 10 1917:

I arrived at Duisburg on 11th May, and was taken to the reserve lazaret, where I remained four months, being in bed for the first eight weeks, Thirty-nine wounded English prisoners went there with me, and there were about 150 prisoners there altogether, of whom about half were English and the others French and Russians, and we were all treated alike. The doctor, who was a civilian, was Doctor Klein, and he spoke English and treated me all right. A German sister dressed my wound, and treated me very well. I was carried down every other day to the operating room to have my wound dressed, and there were sometimes nine or ten of us there together. I have seen Dr. Klein try to bend arms which were stiff by force until some called out with pain, but I do not think he did it to cause pain. as he spoke to us kindly and gave us cigars and cigarettes. We were allowed to smoke anywhere and at any time. The food at first consisted mostly of soup with peas or barley or beans, potatoes once a week, and occasionally a very little meat with macaroni. There were five in my ward, all English, and the bedclothing was clean and sufficient and was changed every week. About the end of June the food got worse - very little in the soup, no potatoes or meat, and less of everthing - and the inspector said we had our own blockade to blame for it. About the middle of July I was allowed out of bed

and given crutches, and could go out for exercise in a small yard, but not into the grounds, where only Germans could go. About 24th July I received my first parcel from Copenhagen with provisions. I received a second parcel of provisions from there, and then two loaves of bread a week, but the bread was mouldy in the summer but got very good in October. I also received about this time about six parcels a month from the Prisoners of War Fund, and biscuits in addition, and with my parcels I got enough to eat. The parcels were censored at Friedrichsfeld, and were opened again by the inspector in the presence of the prisoners, and I found nothing missing from mine. I also received letters about the middle of July, and they came regularly from that time. I was allowed to write two letters and four postcards a month, and they arrived regularly. I have no complaint to make of my treatment at Duisburg, and when I left there my wound had healed.

Journey Sept. 10, 1917:

On 10th September I and eight other English prisoners were taken by passenger train to Dulmen Camp, about three hours' journey. At a station where we changed I saw a German officer kick Private Walker, of the 10th Lincolns, who had lost an eye, and nearly knocked him over, and tell him to "get out of the b--- way" but this is the only time I saw any ill-treatment.

Dulmen. Sept 10, 1917 - Jan 6, 1918:

This is a collecting camp for prisoners, to see who are fit to work, and as I had lost a leg I do not know why I was sent there. We were put in huts, and there were 50 to 60 English. For about two months I got no parcels or letters at Kulmen, as they did not appear to be forwarded from Duilsburg, and the contents of the first parcels I received there were bad except the tins. Afterwards I received my parcels regularly again, and nothing was missing, and I received them regularly till I left on 6th January for Aachen to be repatriated. I was only at Aachen for three days, and parcels were not forwarded to me there. The only clothing I received from the Germans was an overcoat, and the rest I received from England. There were religious services held by an Englishman in another group every Sunday evening, and all who wanted were allowed to go. There was also a concert once a week. While I was at Dulmen a batch of 300 English prisoners came in who had been working behind the lines, and all said they had been very badly treated, and if French women came to give them food, the German guards would knock them out of the way. Amongst these I met Private Toland, of the 2nd Royal Scots, who was taken prisoner unwounded in October 1916, and told me he had been made to work without pay about 5 kilometres behind the western lines, chiefly in unloading stones on roads and at railway stations. He said he had received no letters or parcels, and had been very badly fed and ill-treated, and he looked very ill. He said they were all getting only bread and watery soup, and the majority were very bad. He received his first letter after he had been a week at Dulmen.

WAR OFFICE QUESTIONS.

Until about the end of June 1917, at Duisburg, the food was not so bad. The soup was better, and we had potatoes once a week, and occasionally a little meat, with macaroni. Then the rations were cut down, and we got no potatoes or meat and the soup was poorer, and the inspector told us we had our own blockade to blame for it.

There were 300 to 400 guards at Dulmen, all 50 or over and they were being sorted out all the time, and those ordered to join up were given 10 days' leave. The guard who counted us three times a day was called up in November, and he told us he was nearly 50 and those who were left were

no good for anything. They wanted to buy soap and tinned goods and tea, and they looked hungry when they saw us eating. They said their food was no better than ours.

Opinion of Examiner:

I certify that the above is a correct account of the statement made to me on 26th January 1918 by the witness, who, in my opinion, was intelligent and reliable.

Robert F. Fox
Maxwell House, Arundel Street, W.C.2.

Ron Hewson

Sept 2009