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Evacuation to Wheathampstead.

by John Hinkley (An Evacuee in Wheathampstead)

I was born in **Ramsgate** and lived there for the first few months of the war but when the Germans occupied France, they started to shell Dover and surrounding towns so we moved to London to live with my grandmother. It was not long before it became necessary to evacuate from London and for a short time I was sent, with my sister, to **Wales**. We went to a miner's house which only had two bedrooms and as they already had four children it was very overcrowded. As soon as our mother saw the conditions in which we were living she brought us back to London and arranged for us to go to what was then Hatfield Road, Wheathampstead

Wheathampstead

I remember that we went at first to Hatfield Road, St. Albans. We had no car and there were very few Taxis so we were on foot, loaded with suitcases. When we eventually found our way to Wheathampstead we were all exhausted.

My sister & I were billeted at different houses in the same road and I was alone, a little boy of eight away from my family for the first time. I soon made friends with the other children in the road and in particular with a boy called "**Digger**" **Hunt** who lived a couple of doors away. He seemed to know everyone and was my entry into "society". It was a big change from London, where we could not go far from home in case of air raids. In any case there were very few children to play with because many had been evacuated from London at the beginning of the War. The children in Wheathampstead were friendly and welcomed us and in all the time I was there I did not have or hear a cross word between the children. Nor did I see anyone bullied, they all played together like one big happy family and there were no gangs.

Although there was a son at my billet, he went to the Catholic School and did not seem to play with the other children but I soon got to know the other kids through **Digger** and we had many enjoyable games and adventures. I remember one time when someone had the idea to collect salvage. We collected quite a lot but no one had thought to arrange for the authorities to take it away so it remained at the end of the road for ages. We played lots of games in the field behind the houses and often played Hide & Seek in **Devils Dyke**.

Maurice, son of the house, had some connection with the **Mill** and I sometimes went there with him on a Saturday morning. It was still working then, I wonder if it is still in use.

There were lots of **soldiers training** in the area and we often watched them. I remember that one day one of them threw a thunderflash and a local dog picked it up and ran with it. The flash exploded in the dog's mouth but although the fur on its muzzle was singed, the dog was not seriously hurt.

Although this was a very happy time for me the happiness did not extend to school, which was an entirely different matter. From the beginning my teacher seemed to take a dislike to me and whenever anything went wrong I was first to be blamed. I have since discovered that she had a strong dislike of incomers. She disliked me for no reason other than the fact that she thought that I was a Londoner, and she did not like

Londoners. In common with a lot of adults in Wheathampstead, she thought all Londoners lived in slums and were liars and thieves.

My sister lost a lot of weight and was always hungry. I often spent my pocket money on buns for her. Our Mother became very worried and took her to see our Doctor in London who diagnosed Malnutrition, so she was moved to another billet where she was properly fed. Shortly after this happened she passed her eleven plus and as the bombing in London had almost stopped she went back to home, rather than start a new school which presumably would have meant a daily journey either to St. Albans or Harpenden.

I moved to a new billet at **Castle Rise** with a family called **Davidson or Davison**. There was a young son of about three called **Rodney** and the landlady was very young and treated me like a son. She was a really lovely lady and restored my confidence in human nature. We were next door to **the shop in Castle Rise**.

I was not allowed to play out very often and I missed the company of other children. The **Davisons** had lost a son of about my age in a road accident and I think that they were afraid that the same would happen to me.

Wheathampstead School was my sixth and my education was rather behind when I arrived there and it slowly got worse. The teacher decided that I was a "thicky" and made no attempt to diagnose the problem or help me catch up. She did not understand that the disturbance caused by the changing of schools was the cause and not my lack of ability. My parents became very worried about my slow progress and decided to take me home to London. The teacher at the local school in South London was very good and saw what the problem was straight away. Within 18 months I was able to sit and pass my eleven plus and I won a scholarship to Grammar School by the skin of my teeth.

Overall I was very happy in Wheathampstead. The children were lovely and welcomed us although one little girl told me that her mother had said that our mothers had sent us to Wheathampstead so they could go out to work and earn lots of money. I suppose that you could not blame the mother because **there was a news blackout which forbade the release of details of air raids** but statistics released after the war show that the casualty toll in London during the 2nd world war exceeded 60,000, a large part of which arose during the London Blitz. (see below for Government Statistics)

The adults were not too bad to us, although I had very little contact with them, other than the people with whom I was billeted but Oh that Teacher! I swear that I saw her getting off of a broomstick as I arrived at school one morning. I expect that she has passed on now and has gone to teach in the big school in the sky. If she has, I hope that she will spend eternity teaching disruptive cockney kids.

Until I looked at your web site I was not aware that there was a railway that passed through Wheathampstead. We always went by bus in to St. Albans or Harpenden on the rare occasions that we visited town.

Everyone thought that the war was all but over, but Hitler had another dirty trick up his sleeve – the **V. weapons**. The East End of London had suffered a lot in the Blitz although we in South London had received our share. We lived within walking distance of **Clapham Junction** which was a major target. The Buzz Bombs caused much wider devastation, taking out five or six houses at a time, with lots of blast damage. We were determined not to be evacuated again and held out as long as we could, but I arrived home from school one day to find that Adolph had left a visiting card. No roof, doors or windows and all the ceilings down – uninhabitable. As houses were in short supply we had no alternative but to go away again, this time to Scarborough.

Anyway, thanks for your hospitality Wheathampstead. I am sure that we must have seemed as strange to you as you did to us.

Statistics of Casualties for period of Blitz (7/9/1940 to 11/5/1941):

In the worst single incident in the Blitz 450 were killed when a bomb hit an air raid shelter at a school in West Ham.

- 10 May 1941 was the worst night of the Blitz (and the last). 3000 people were killed in London that night.
- 40% of housing in Stepney was destroyed during the Blitz.
- 3000 unexploded Bombs (UXBs) were dealt with during Blitz.
- 1,400,000 people were made homeless due to the Blitz.
- Just over 20,000 people were killed in the London Blitz.

Definition of Blitz: intensive or sudden attack, usually aerial (Oxford English Dictionary)

John Hinkley

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