

from Hayden Cosgrove

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I was born on the 10th September 1931 and in 1939 was attending Thornbury Junior School. The school was between two large engineering works, English Electric and Crofts. These works were of national importance in the event of the country being at war. It was considered inevitable that if war did break out they would probably be subject to attack by an enemy.

In consequence, it was decided in 1939 that an evacuation of Thornbury children was deemed advisable. Evacuation plans were made prior to the school breaking up for the summer holidays in July 1939. Further, gas mask practices had taken place in that summer term. Parents had been consulted and volunteers sought to assist in any evacuation. Our family consisted of father, mother, who is now ninety years of age, my sister Shirley who was five years of age and myself aged seven.

In August 1939 we went on holiday to Wales and returned on Monday the 28th August. Upon reflection, I suppose my parents felt that with the danger of war so near on the horizon, this might be the last holiday we would enjoy for a considerable time. Equally they would endeavour to put their fears behind them during our stay in Wales. Upon our return they were advised that the proposed evacuation had become a reality. We were to be evacuated on the Friday of that week.

On Friday the 1st September some 72 children, helpers and teachers gathered at the school. The teachers included Mr. Mann, Mr. McDowell, Miss Willis and Mrs. Rigg. The children wore name tags around their necks, carried gas masks over their shoulders and had cases containing their clothing and personal possessions. We proceeded to Bradford Exchange Station by buses to join other children who were leaving the city and going on a journey into the unknown. There was little emotion and generally the situation was accepted by all. At the very least we were with our friends, teachers and some parent helpers. We proudly marched into the station behind our banner "Thornbury Boys Group". Other schools carried banners giving the name of their school. It could well have been a school trip. The children were completely oblivious of the storm which was gathering and which would engulf the nation. The teachers and parent helpers successfully kept their fears to themselves. We were participating in a venture which was to radically change our lives and leave an indelible mark on our memories. The train journey was enjoyed by the children. There was the usual chatter and excitement that one might expect. Some children enjoyed looking out of the train windows passing comment on what had passed by.

Finally, we arrived at Settle. We alighted from the train and formed up behind our school banners. Proudly we marched through Settle in one long procession. No doubt the residents looked upon us with curiosity and concern. We were marched to an assembly point where we were given emergency rations. We collected, in the carrier bags handed to us, a tin of Nestles milk, cocoa, corned beef, Kitkats etc. Our school group then proceeded to Horton in Ribblesdale where we were met by a reception committee at the village school.

Mother speaks of the efforts made by people of Horton to make us welcome and to settle us within their community. Even so there was some apprehension on their faces. Would these town children adapt to a country environment. What effect would they have on the life of the village? The number of children involved required more than volunteers for homes. It was evident that some persuasion had to be used to find homes for all the evacuees.

My mother, sister, myself and two other children were taken initially by car to a house in Horton. The lady of the house had the misfortune to wear leg irons. After some discussion it was decided to find alternative accommodation. We then were taken to a farm at Selside and the farmer and his wife had had little or no notice of the "guests" which were to be imposed upon them. We had something to eat and looked around our new surroundings. Conditions at the farm were somewhat spartan. No beds were available so we had to sleep on a bedroom floor.

I can vividly remember mother telling my sister, myself and the other two children in no uncertain terms not to venture outside the farm complex. The fells presented untold dangers.

During the first night mother decided she would try and find alternative accommodation for us the following day. On the Saturday morning we walked from the farm down a farm track towards Horton. It was a very warm September morning. I can remember wearily walking towards Horton. When we arrived at the main road, a lorry driver stopped and asked if he could assist by giving us a lift in his lorry. His act of kindness was most welcome. He took us to Horton where we met our friends. Mother arranged for us to go to Miss King's Guest House which was in the village.

On Sunday the 3rd September mother took us to the village Church for morning service. She relates that the vicar spoke of the crisis which faced the country and of his prayers that peace would prevail. An ultimatum had been given for the German Government and which was to expire at 11 a.m.

As the service ended the vicar went to the main doors of the church to greet his congregation. The doors had been opened. A lady rushed into the church yard, went to the vicar and whispered that the Germans had not complied with the ultimatum and hence we were at war. This dramatic news was received with shock and sadness by the congregation.

It was decided that some normality in the life of the children should be restored as soon as possible. Hence we were summoned to Horton village school to resume our education. The school had not the facilities to cope with the number of children that had descended upon the village. Even so the Horton teachers together with the Thornbury teachers made a sterling effort to bring about some normality. It must be remembered that the Thornbury childrens ages ranged from about five years of age to eleven years of age. A good relationship arose between the villagers, their children and ourselves. An even closer bond arose between the Thornbury children.

When we untimately returned home we could say "We were at Horton in Ribblesdale". I think of my friends Malcolm Creek, Gerald and Moira Pattinson, Peter Dear, Brian Robbins, Brian Green and of others.

On the 10th September I was to celebrate my 8th birthday. My mother decided that a party was to be held so invitations went out to friends.

Miss King at the Guest House which we were living gave every assistance to ensure the party was a success. I remember going to a sweet shop near the railway station to purchase some sweets. The shopkeeper kindly let us have some "Window sweets", that is sweets which were made of wood but appropriately wrapped. These were mixed with the proper sweets and duly handed round. There was great laughter when one took a tempting sweet and found it contained a wooden sweet. I think these sweets were "Quality Street".

Miss King had in her garden a small ornamental pond. My sister had the misfortune of falling in the pond and I had to come to her rescue. Her tears vanished when Miss King gave her a box of sweets. These insignificant events were but a small part of the wider experiences of a child.

Eventually we left Horton in Ribblesdale and returned to our respective homes. My sister and myself then went to live with an uncle at Farsley near Leeds. My parents felt this was more immune to air attack. By this time we had fully comprehended the realities of being a nation at war.

Our stay in Horton in Ribblesdale had been a traumatic but yet a very happy experience. A bond of friendship had been forged and which continued for many years. Mr. Mann re-visited Horton many times in the years after the war. So did some of the evacuees.

Upon his return from Horton Mr. Mann joined the Tank Regiment and in which he served until the end of the war. He was presented with a large suit case by the children upon his mobilisation. Much to his amazement inside the case was hidden one of the boys. After the war Mr. Mann returned to the school and stayed there until his retirement in 1972. In the post war years he loved to relate to the children the story of the evacuation.

It was an unforgettable event and one which is indelibly imprinted on my mind.

We now approach the fiftieth anniversary of the evacuation. May I express to you all at Horton in Ribblesdale and Selside the sincerest thanks from the former children of Thornbury School for your kindness and hospitality. As a serving Governor of the school I convey to you our greetings. May God bless you all.

Hayden Cooper