

MEMORIES - by ROSINA WOODWARD (nee Rankin)

The date was the 2nd September 1939, a Saturday. There was our mum, then 33 years old, with her six children, four boys and two girls, aged from 12 years down to our baby sister, who was just one year old. Her first birthday had been the day before. I came second eldest at 10 years old.

We were carrying our bags, plus the recently issued gas masks, going away from London for safety; yes, we were being 'Evacuated'. Our dad was left at home in the East End of London. We were on a 'Mothers and Children' scheme. We arrived at Paddington Railway Station and shown to a special train, with no idea as to where we were going.

We eventually arrived at Didcot in Berkshire (this status was later changed to Oxfordshire), where we then got onto a coach or bus (I cannot remember which). After what seemed a long way along country lanes, we arrived in Sutton Courtenay, at the Village Hall. The Village Hall then was in Wallingford Way, or 'round the backs' as we later described it.

We were welcomed, given some refreshments, and then lined up. The ladies who were going to have 'evacuees' then chose who they wished to house. Naturally, mum with her six children were left until last. However, a lovely lady, Mrs Phyllis Tinson, took us four eldest. Mum with the two little ones went to stay with the two Miss Beaumonts. They lived at No.25 Church Street, a really lovely house with a garden which went right down to the river. I remember the apple tree close to the house at the back, with the reddist apples I had ever seen, and we were allowed to have some. Mrs Tinson's home was a wooden bungalow type building, down Church Lane, almost opposite to where mum was billeted.

We continued to live in Sutton Courtenay for several months. As things were quiet in London and no bombing, most of the families had returned to London. Eventually my mother decided to return home to be with our dad. This was probably quite early in 1940, my memory is a bit hazy on some of the events. However, in June 1940, my dad said to mum, "Write to those ladies in Sutton Courtenay and see if they will have the four eldest children back", as he thought things were going to get bad, and he was right.

They agreed and back mum came with us four eldest, but this time to leave us. I and my brother Tony stayed with Mrs Tinson, George and Teddy stayed with the two Miss Beaumonts. My brothers loved it. I myself got very homesick and soon my mum came and took me back to London.

In September 1940 the 'Blitz' started. I can still remember it and how frightened I was. Dad said we were to go to Sutton Courtenay. So off mum went with me and the two youngest. The journey by coach to Paddington was quite an ordeal, as we had to get off and go into the nearest street shelter during an air raid. However, after a long journey we were back in Sutton Courtenay.

Now housing was a problem. However, a place was found for us all to be together, two of the then six Armshouses. (Now there are three Armshouses, each two being made into one). Imagine it, a mother with six children - no inside water, no gas or electricity, and an outside Elson toilet. But we were safe and my mum was grateful and made the best of it and somehow we managed. We lived in those little Armshouses all the war years and were happy.

On coming back to Sutton Courtenay in September 1940, it was to find that another lot of 'evacuees' had come to the village, children on their own (no mothers). Naturally the village school (then in the High Street), was not large enough to take all the extra children, so the Village Hall in Wallingford Way was used as a school, and this is where we went during the war years. I liked school and enjoyed going to the 'London School' as it was called. The Hall was divided by curtains or screens (I can't remember which) into classrooms. Many things are hazy now, but I remember we used to do P.E. outside in the lane. I can remember the races we had along that lane, also I remember the Rounders Match, on the recreation ground, with pupils from the Village School.

Another thing I remember is that we all had places to go to should there be an 'air raid warning'. I loved it when we had a 'practice', as I was among the group that had to go to Mr Carter's house, the shoemender, in the High Street. We were always given a drink and jam tarts by Mrs Carter, and made to laugh so much by Mr Carter, sitting among his huge pile of shoes and boots waiting to be mended. Such good people and remembered with much gratitude.

When during the 'Blitz' our house was badly damaged and could no longer be lived in, our dad left London and joined us in Sutton Courtenay. He arrived plus our cat. He was a painter and decorator and was able to get a job at Harwell Aerodrome (as it was then). He used to cycle to work. Soon he was 'called up' and went into the Army as a Gunner in the Royal Artillery.

The years went by and eventually the children attending the London School were few, so it had to close. We that remained went to the village school in the High Street. I enjoyed my short time there, but at 14 years old had to leave school. On leaving school I went to work at the Royal Army Ordnance Depot in Didcot, where the Power Station is now. In those days there was no restrictions about how many hours young people worked. As my job as a Messenger was classed as 'Industrial', I had to be there at 7.30am, until about 5pm, I think it was. At first I walked, but was soon able to get a lift, for one shilling a week, there being space in a car in which a friend of mums travelled to work at the Depot. This 'car sharing' was very common then. My wages were 14 shillings a week. From this I gave my mum ten, paid my one shilling car fare and the three left were mine. Surprising how far three shillings went in those days.

I now had a boyfriend (the one who was to become my husband) who lived in the village. He was the one who gave me the deposit for a bicycle, bought from Picketts in Stert Street, Abingdon. The bicycle cost about seven pounds, which was a lot of money then. I used to pay for it at 2/6d a week. My wages were higher as I was a Grade I Typist by then. That bicycle was my prized possession and served me well for many years.

At the end of the war when my dad was demobbed, my parents returned to London. I really did not want to leave, but at 17 I had to do as I was told. I stayed a little while with some friends of the family until I returned to London by train, taking my precious bicycle with me. I now had a different boyfriend who lived in Didcot, so I used to travel down for some week-ends.

When I was 19 I changed boyfriends again - went back to my first one, who having been in the Army and kept in touch by the occasional letter, met me in London. Soon I was engaged to him and began almost three years of travelling by train from London to Sutton Courtenay every three weeks. Eventually we were married, in London, on the 2nd September 1950 - eleven years to the day I first came to Sutton Courtenay as an 'Evacuee'. Quite an 'unintentional' coincidence.

So I came back to live in this village (my precious bike travelled back, by 'Carter Paterson' this time). I am still living, sadly as a widow now, in our bungalow we moved into in 1954.

There are other tales I could tell about my family and their connections with this lovely village of Sutton Courtenay, but I do not want to bore you, dear reader.

Typed by me today, the 14th October 2008.