

Ted Bowen 11 June 2004

I believe the war was announced on 3rd September 1939. I was six years old and lived in a home under the London County Council. The homes were controlled by foster mothers, mainly spinsters you would say. There would be about maybe 12 or 14 children in each home. We lived in Oaklands Road, Cricklewood. When we left our home at Oaklands Road we were in a procession similar to that in the photograph, (of evacuees marching from Midland Road rail station at the County Records Archive) children and adults, going to the Cricklewood Station. I can remember looking back to the neighbour who had the cat by her, at the gate, I remember waving to her as we left Cricklewood.

Now the journey from Cricklewood to Bedford didn't take very long time, under an hour. So when we arrived in Bedford we made the procession from Midland Road to St.Paul's Square (as in the photograph) which was the market square in those days anyway. Having assembled at the market square there were several types of transport to pick up the groups of evacuees to take them to different rural areas of Bedford. Now, our group were fortunate in that we went to the village of Elstow. We all assembled at the school at Elstow. We were met by the headmaster, Mr Bob Wadsworth and his staff.

In the assembly room were all the village people with the interest of taking evacuees. This was not an auction, Bob Wadsworth wasn't saying this is Lot No. 1 but he was saying here is a little boy or girl looking for a home during the war. Now in my particular case I was rather fortunate that I was with my foster mother from London, Miss Florence Finch and with another boy Lionel Moore, also six years old, we were housed in the High Street of Elstow, with Mr and Mrs Richard Burr.

We stayed there for a year or so but when Mrs Burr was expecting a child we were moved to another residence in Elstow. This person was a spinster, Miss Nell Noble who lived in a cottage on Elstow Green, which is still in occupation.

Nell Noble was in her 60s and was stone deaf and we lived with her for several years and when Miss Finch reached the retiring age to leave her job she found me another foster mother because Nell Noble couldn't have managed two little boys on her own.

My new foster mother was Mrs Mary Ellen Snelson who lived in the cottage next to Nell Noble's cottage. I said with Mary Ellen Snelson and Lionel Moore stayed with her sister Elsie May Robinson.

Moving from Cricklewood to Elstow, Bedford was the turning point in my life. The families of Snelsons and Robinsons were great people and gave us a wonderful home life.

Mary Ellen Snelson had a son, Derek, aged 15, and her husband, RICHARD was the dairyman at Pear Tree Farm, Elstow. Elsie May Robinson, had a son, Eric aged 16 and her husband Bill was the tractor driver at Medbury Farm, Elstow.

During the war period I can remember being at the school and requested to assemble on the sports field where we witnessed two planes colliding with each other and crashing into Miller Road, Bedford. During the same period, late one evening, I can remember where we occupied in a cottage in Wilstead Road, Elstow, where we heard the doodle-bug noises and I was positioned beneath the stairs of the cottage as it went over. We believe it was making it's way to Cranfield.

My happy memories now refer back to the Elstow School where we had some great times. At the end of the war we had a military officer attend our class and he was introduced by Bob Wadsworth

as John Marshall McNeil who was to become our English teacher. He was also a very keen sportsman and controlled us in our local sports, football, cricket and running, all that type of thing, he was involved. During the summer periods there used to be summer camps at Little Gaddesden, Herts where Mr McNeil controlled the Elstow Group. The students participated in sports, country walks and things of that nature.

Elstow school was also prominent with its activity with the Elstow May Day Festivals. These events went on during the war and records will show that they began when Mr Wadsworth became the Headmaster of the school in the early 1920s. The Elstow May Queen was selected by the girls of the top form each year. They were not always local Elstow girls as the school also served Haynes, Cotton End and Cople.

The May Day Festivals involved preparations by the families of the schoolchildren in preparing bunting of small flowers designs on twigs and boughs which the children carried during the procession. The May Pole was carried by the older boys of the school, six to eight boys. And then the May Queen was escorted in a coach, also pulled by the older boys, from the school to The Green. Apart from the May Queen in the coach there was the Coachman in his top hat and red tunic. During the event of the May Day you had the children performing their dances around the May Pole with the coloured ribbons and during the music the ribbons around the May Pole achieved different patterns. The students placed/stuck their boughs of flowers into The Green in circles around the May Pole. Towards the end of the ceremony the May Queen was crowned and the Coachman made a speech and then four doves were released from a basket as a symbol of peace. The ceremony was performed on the first Thursday in May at 3pm and then an evening performance at 6pm. There were literally thousands of people who attended and a collection for charity was made. My last involvement with the May Day was as a programme seller as I was no dancer.

During my young days in Elstow, I first had a part time job with Mr Carding who operated a garage in the village but also sold vegetables and fruit on Saturdays around the village and the local roads and streets of Mile Road and area. Later on I then took a part time job with Mr Alan Prudden, the Dairy Farm in Elstow village, so that on Saturday's I was delivering the milk to the parishioners. I used to collect the fruit from the orchard for Mrs Prudden to sell locally and also I did cleaning jobs in the cow shed. The Prudden family go back generations as far back as the 1700s. At Prudden's dairy the Italian prisoners of war dug a trench in the main pasture field and were there for several weeks!

Locally I used to go the Elstow Chapel but later on when Mr Richard Snelson became Vicar during the 1950s I then went to Elstow Abbey Church. At that particular time the Vicar was Mr Peter Hartley who was a former prisoner of war in the East. Peter Hartley's father was Stanley Hartley who was a school teacher at Bedford Modern School. During the war years we used to visit the Vicarage to collect sausage rolls, pork pies and pastries for the village people. The same facility was also provided by the Humpries family in the High Street near the school.

You will appreciate that as a young lad in London it was not until I came to Elstow that I first saw a cow and a horse in my life. So that illustrates how wonderful it was for me to experience rural activities. Another feature during my time in the village was the fact that the Elstow Lodge occupied by the Graham family with Mr Graham who was a former Town Clerk at the Bedford Town Hall and annually he used to have controlled shoots were invited sportsmen came with their guns and ammunition to sort out the partridges, the rabbits and what have you as we, the youngsters were controlled by Mr Ernie Burr, the gamekeeper as we acted as beaters for the shooting parties.

As an evacuee I had the marvellous experience and home life with a foster mother Mary Ellen Snelson for over