

The Walk to School in Wartime

by Liz Mardel-Ferreira (then Dib McMeeking)

Child evacuees, wearing labels and carrying square gas mask cases, are standard images of World War Two.

Luckily I escaped both. There was no mass evacuation of children from Nottingham as there was from more vulnerable cities and somehow our mother had found us gas mask cases with no corners! (Ours were cylinder-shaped, with a round lid over one end. They fitted snugly across the small of the back like a satchel and we thought them very cool!)

I was eight when the war started so had been doing the daily three-quarter mile walk to Wyvil School for three years, towed by my big brother in our little scarlet blazers. Later, gas mask on back, I would be towing my younger brother and collecting an assortment of young friends along the way

We lived at the top of Pembroke Drive, off Tavistock Drive. The name of our little road had itself got wartime connections. The officer-training of one of my mother's adored twin brothers had been at Pembroke College, Cambridge but at 20 he was killed just five weeks from the end of World War One. So when my parents married in 1927 and built The End House (for £750!) their little private road was named in memory of our uncle.

Our father had also served in France in World War One and was now too old to be called up so we had none of the disruptions suffered by the families whose fathers were away from home. However, the walk along the switchback of Cyprus Road and up Sefton Drive to Wyvil, a school then on the borders of Mapperley Park and Sherwood, brought daily reminders that life was anything but normal for many of our neighbours.

Our route to school took us down a path between 'Redlands' and 'the field' (where two houses now stand.) Half the field had become a vegetable garden and hen run but my ten-year-old brother and his friends had busied themselves digging trenches bordering Cyprus Road to defend us from the might of the advancing German army! The nerve centre of the trench system was The Fort – a deep hole they had dug under the wide elderberry bush. Ammunition was rows of sand-filled Quink bottles that doubled as hand grenades.

Along the path, down the steps, through a gate and we were on Cyprus Road. One or two of the children from the house at the highest point usually joined us on our walk. Their mother told us one day that Gabriel had just joined the Air Force. It seemed particularly appropriate. I don't know whether he ever got his wings! Another day, at the bottom of that hill we passed a young couple from Mapperley Hall Drive with their little boy in a pushchair. I remember thinking how pretty she was, and how handsome her young husband, on leave in his naval officer's uniform. But his ship sailed off to the Far East and he was later posted forever just 'Missing'. Years later it was a shock to see that it was still his name rather than hers in the phone book.

On the corner of Mapperley Hall Drive and Carisbrooke Drive lived a family we knew at the Scottish Church. Three of their four sons were in the services, one army, one navy and one air force. Roy was a pilot in the Battle of Britain. But his plane was hit and part of it fell and killed him as he bailed out. The day that the announcement of his death appeared in the Evening Post was the first time we had ever seen our mother cry. At the bottom of Sefton Drive was a friend whose daughter had been called up for the Women's Land Army, doing backbreaking work on farms. On the right at the top of Sefton Drive was a spare building plot. The school turned it into a

kitchen garden and we all regularly 'Dug for Victory'. Was it in class time or lunch break? I can't remember but I do know that this was the first time I'd seen sweetcorn, and we'd grown it ourselves!

And so to the Mapperley Park entrance to Wyvil School, up a steep wide path off Arlington Drive that to a small child seemed to go on forever! The brick gateposts are still there. The school had once been a big family house – Georgian or early Victorian – and another entrance was in Private Road. There were about seven classrooms, a playground, a tennis court and a dug-out air raid shelter under the tulip tree. It was ruled over by the formidable Miss Hancock. On the day France fell we'd been home for lunch and picked up the seriousness of the situation from the news on the radio. We returned to school full of foreboding and went round saying 'Isn't it awful, isn't it awful'. But we had Brownies that afternoon and Brown Owl (our lovely Miss Trease) sat us down for a pep talk. Firmly but kindly she said "There's no point in going round saying 'Isn't it awful'. If there's something you can do to help, then get on and do it. If not, then carry on as usual" and we all felt a lot better!

So school life carried on – punctuated by the occasional air-raid siren and training for getting us into the shelter. Children appeared or disappeared every now and again. Hilda, Helga and Ruth, three older girls, arrived from Germany but seldom spoke. I wanted to talk to them but was too shy. I would see them standing together quietly under the yew tree beside the playground. Perhaps they'd arrived on the 'Kindertransport', I've often wondered. And there was the frightened little German boy being chased round the playground by a baying pack of young monsters taunting 'Nazi, Nazi'. Oh to have had the courage to stand up to them!

At the end of the school day the journey home usually took a different route. The war had brought Claudine to the school for a year or two. Her father was an army officer and her mother was French. She had four older siblings and like many service families they had moved around. So whereas I was a sheltered, timid goody-goody

Claudine was adaptable and fearless. She was also naughty and led me into mischief for the first time in my life. I thought she was wonderful!

One little trick she taught a group of us was performed near the bottom of the school drive. A car owner had installed a mechanism that enabled him to drive over a metal plate like a manhole-cover, in the tarmac at his entrance, so springing open the gates in the high fence surrounding his garden. A group of us would crowd onto the metal plate and at a command from Claudine we all jumped, the gates flew open and we removed ourselves hastily!. One day, however, the gardener was waiting behind the fence with a hosepipe.....! So there was no repeat performance!

Claudine's house was near the far end of Arlington Drive and I sometimes went there after school to play. Her three oldest siblings were seldom at home but it was only in

the nineteen-sixties, when a weekend supplement published an article about the SOE, that I knew where her big brother Cyril had been at the time. He had been trained as a wireless operator, parachuted into occupied France and joined partisans in blowing up factories and ammunition trains for which he was awarded the Military Cross and the Croix de Guerre. Her two sisters were also, I've just discovered, in the SOE. After her father was posted to Scotland they moved to Edinburgh and I didn't see her again.

Many, many more of the homes along our route must have harboured stories of wartime tragedy or courage, sadness or success behind their walls and fences but we passed them by - unaware.

Two Canadian soldiers turned up at St Andrew's Presbyterian Church one day and were invited by our parents to our home. 'Uncle Bob' Calder and 'Uncle Sam'

became frequent visitors. Both had left families at home and enjoyed having children to spoil – and we enjoyed the goodies they were sometimes able to bring!

I think it was the women of the 'Inner Wheel' (the wives of Rotarians) who realised that there was nowhere for off-duty service-women to relax if they didn't want to spend the time in pubs. So they hired a hall behind the local Victoria Station and organised a rota of helpers to provide a sort of café at weekends. When it was my mother's turn to be 'on duty' I went with her. We took the bus (three ha'penny fare for her and a ha'penny for me!) It was usually a very busy afternoon, making sandwiches or serving at the counter with the room full of WAAFS, ATS girls and perhaps even a few WRENS! I think they found it amusing to be served by a nine/ten year old and I enjoyed the experience, though I did dread having to work out the change for a ten-shilling or one-pound note! And so from Arlington Drive back up the hill to home

Of course we were affected by the war – my big brother had moved on to The Dolphin which was one school that was evacuated to the country. One night in four my father stayed at the Control Centre in Nottingham as a Senior Incident Officer ready to co-ordinate the civilian services (ARP, fire and ambulance) during air raids. We were affected by the shortages of course, and by the fear we felt on hearing the wail of the sirens or the thudding drone of German bombers flying above us. We slept in the shelter every night for several months while they flew over to attack other cities. One night my father was standing outside the shelter, about to leave for the Control Centre when my mother called him back for some reason. At that moment a piece of white-hot shrapnel fell on the spot where he'd been standing. The one stray bomb that irreparably damaged the foundations of the home of friends in Mapperley Hall Drive came without warning one afternoon as we lay in bed with measles. There were raids, but only once did Nottingham feel the full force of a blitz and that night our father's factory in the Lace Market took a direct hit. The miles of mosquito and camouflage netting then being produced instead of glamorous lace and net were safe. However the wing of the factory that was destroyed in a massive fire that night had been let to a storage company and must have been filled with the treasured possessions of men, women and children now displaced.

Yes, we were all affected but, compared to the experiences of children in Portsmouth near to my current home, I think most of the young of Mapperley Park escaped the war relatively unscathed.



Wyvil School before the war.
"The Pied Piper" in 1937
(Above) Miss Hancock and some of the cast
(Right) My big brother and me

(Top Right) My little brother at home in our
father's Incident Officer's uniform

