

Evacuated from Coventry

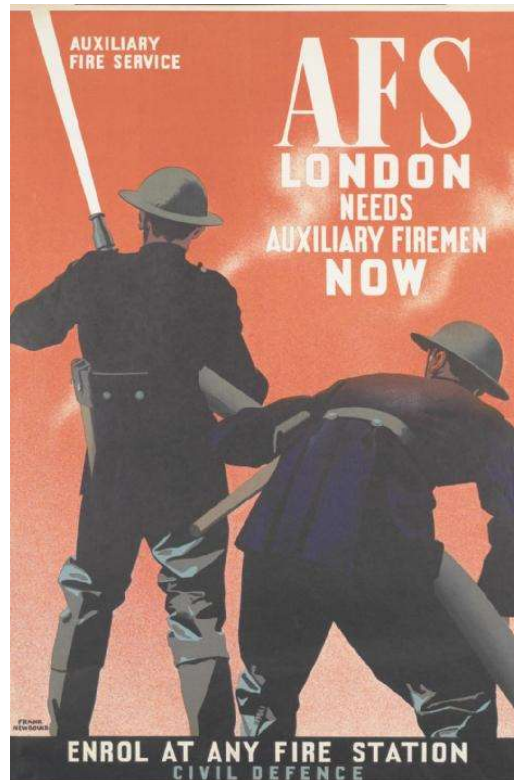
As you know the war started in 1939. I was a schoolgirl of six years of age, born April 1933.. At that time I was attending Stoke Council School in Coventry, as my father had done before me.



It was decided to put Anderson shelters down our road for the families who lived there. My father decided he would build us his own shelter in the garden, so dug up part of the lawn, halfway and then dug out to a suitable depth, so he could put in four steps and a base floor. The walls were made of ten inch thick concrete, and a hatch area was left for escape, if we needed it. Inside, there were erected two bunk beds, for my sister and myself. There was also room for a chair by the hatch, for my mother, and one by the bunks for my sister. The hatch had a wooden cover, which could be pushed outwards, when needed, but luckily it was never used. Things of basic need were kept there, such as books, puzzles, sweets, food in a tin, and blankets and pillows on the beds.

You may be wondering why there was no mention of where my father would sit. He joined the Auxiliary Fire Service, so when there was a raid, he was expected to report for duty. His base was at the garage opposite the pub called the Wyken Pippin and there

they waited until the call came for help. His time was spent playing draughts and he became very good at the game. Also food was available and they slept. They had a uniform, a hat, a hatchet too



Everywhere our windows had to be blacked-out either by something put on the windows or well fitting curtains, so no sign of electric light could be seen from outside

When the siren sounded, we went down to the shelter. When it was finished, the hatch had been covered again with grass from the lawn, leaving just the step entrance to be seen. My mother had said we were to put on trousers and a jumper, over our clothes before we went there. If we were in our own beds, then the garments lay on them ready to be put on. If we were eating our lunch, then we put on our clothes and took our food with us. We could only leave the shelter when the “all clear” sounded. If we were there a long time, then there was a chamber pot to use!.

On a field about 400 feet away was an anti-aircraft gun, a searchlight and an anti-aircraft gun. which we named “Big Bertha”. Should the gun sound, then I usually woke and could have a little sweet and off to sleep I went. My sister slept, read, did her homework, and puzzles and chatted to my mother. My mother sat and sewed, knitted, and read. I do not remember any music or any noises except the raid. After the “all clear” my father would eventually return home, and never spoke of what he had seen or done. Occasionally he came home smelling of farmyards and once of margarine. Afterwards life carried on as normal, until the next time.



From my house, my sister and I walked to school up Dane Road. we would call for Iris, and Pat on the way. It used to take us 15 to 20 mins. I do remember that after one of the big raids we could not go to school, so we went, mornings only, to a house in Wyke Road, for “our school”. It was usually that our normal school building was being used for people who had been affected by the raid. The swimming pools were used as mortuaries, after the Big Raid, so there was not a chance to learn to swim.

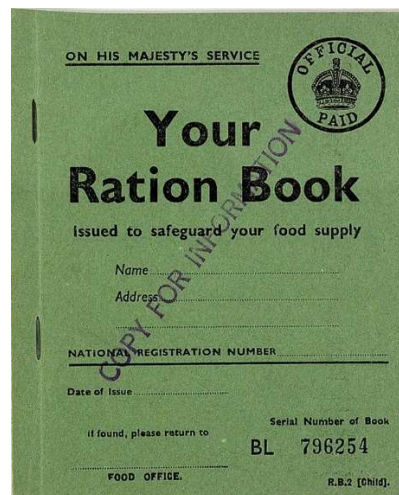
During the five years of war, my sister sat the “11 plus” exam, and passed for Stoke Park School, a girl’s only grammar school. As the war progressed, the two girls’ grammar schools, Barrs Hill and Stoke Park, decided to evacuate as many girls as wish to go, to Atherstone. Once there, they attended the girl’s grammar school in Atherstone. The girls had to have a billet which meant that you lived with a family, chosen for you. In Coventry we could not get fresh water and milk easily, so I went to Rev. David Smith’s home in Kenilworth. After one night, Kenilworth was bombed, so Rev. and Mrs Smith. decided to go home to Wales.

My mother came and fetched me home, and the following night, we had the very bad raid of Coventry, November 14th 1940. After that my parents took me to Atherstone, to join my sister, and I went to the village school in Mancetter.

All was well until one day, when I was told that Mrs. Pickering and her mother wanted to adopt me, but not my sister. Mary was very worried and so went into Atherstone, and asked people for a billet. One of her schoolfriends, June went home and told her foster mother, who responded by saying, “go and tell her to come here” So that afternoon, Mary and I went to the new house. Here was June, and the family. Mr and Mrs. Ball at number 4 who said I could stay, and my sister went next door to Mrs. Smith’s at number 6 with another school friend, called Gwen. June and I slept on the “onion bed”, so named after Mr. Ball’s drying of his onions on the springs of the bed, each year. Hence while we were there the onions went elsewhere. Here we were very happy, and I stayed until the end of the war, moving into number 6 when Gwen went home to Coventry. I went to the local primary school, and then returning to Coventry to take the

“11plus.. exam then I went to a grammar school too. Shortly after I joined my sister at number 6 she had an infection from a TB germ in a neck gland, which needed an operation. So she returned to Coventry, had the operation, and convalesced at Kington. Then she returned home and stayed there till the end of the war. My parents were very good. They came every Saturday to see us in Mancetter and Atherstone. They cycled 15 miles each way and never missed a weekend, or grumbled at the energy needed to do it. We were overjoyed to see them and waited by the Convent on the A5, to meet them. As Mrs. Smith had chickens, we could register for our eggs with her. So each week my mother went home with fresh eggs. And I used to fetch them. after the war until the rationing stopped via the Midland Red Bus, every Saturday.

Everyone had a ration book and each week coupons were taken out for food, milk, eggs, butter meat etc and clothing and bedding. When someone was getting married, all friends and family pooled their coupons so the bride could buy material for her dress. Parachute silk was used for slips and nighties.



Whilst we were evacuated, my mother would go out too in a raid, to drive the canteen for the firemen. She remembers how in a fog she went round and round a roundabout, trying to find the way off it. My father was in charge at the Cathedral, when it was bombed. Being the leading fireman he had to make decisions. Normally water came through from the group at the Swanwell Pool, but as they had been killed none came. Hence the tragedy of the Cathedral burning. After the war my father gave a lot of time to the Chapel of Unity at the Cathedral, and a new chapel was built into the new



Cathedral.

In Atherstone we went to the local Congregational Church, and were in Pilots. Whilst Mary did her homework, I went on errands to the Co-op, to fetch groceries. On a Saturday. I fetched 21 newspapers. Mr. Smith always had six, and looked at the racing results, and also football too. Mr. Smith was a miner, who went off at 1.00pm. and went by transport to Ansley pit. He always wrapped his watch in cotton wool. in a tin, and took his food too. Luckily they had pit head baths, so he never came home black. Mr. Hatton of the next house, at number 8 was not so lucky so he always came home with a black face.

There was no bathroom, so a bath meant bringing in a tin bath in front of the range, and water was heated on the range. If you wanted a wash in the scullery it was in cold water. So Friday night became wash night. Mr Smith went out to see his friends. We put the tin bath

In front of the range. Before we could have our bath, we had to clean the cutlery, then all the glasses then we could have a bath sharing the water. As there was no electricity, the light was an oil one. and mantles had to be bought. When we went to bed, we took a candle, and walked up the twisting stair to the front bedroom. It was a *high* bed, so I had to climb onto a chair, in order to get into bed. I said there was no bathroom, so to go to the loo we had to go down the yard both in daylight and darkness. There was a wooden seat across the lavatory area and a bucket underneath. Usually, newspaper was hanging on a string, to use when needed. The bucket had to be emptied, but luckily I did not have to do it.

After school I played outside in the street with balls, whip and top. We became very good at different games, and friends from up the road joined in too. As we played we could hear the Salvation Army practising their songs for the services. When I was not at school! used to go up the outwoods. To get there, I walked up a path passed Mrs. Govan's, and then a footpath to a bridge going over the railway. The playground had lots of swings, merry-go-rounds, but I swung and watched trains. Express trains had 19 coaches, *and* freight trains – had 48 trucks. To go passed the playground, you came to the canal path. Sometimes we went down that, and came back over the next bridge. Another time we would go into the outwoods, and run and play, and if it was bluebell time, we went passed the Beehive cottage to see the bluebells. Also we saw the horses pulling the canal barges, loaded with coal,. In Coventry my mother always had coal brought to Longford by barge, and then delivered by lorry, in hundred-weight sacks. My job was to count ten bags, which were tipped into the coal house.

I shall always remember the freedom felt and enjoyed in Atherstone. Mrs. Ball used to let me borrow her cycle, and I rode to Mrs. Smith's sister at Bentley, going passed Atherstone Hall. The road was steep, so often *I* had to push the cycle, but coming home *it* was lovely free-wheeling down to Atherstone. On Shrove Tuesday, the shop fronts were boarded up, as a football match took place down the A5 main street.. Even today this still happens. Another time, I would go to Mr. Ball's father's farm, and meet his family. His sister Joan was very welcoming, and I used to ride her horse, under her supervision. I roamed round the farm and had lovely teas, and went home with lots of things for the Ball family.

As Mr. Smith and Mr. Hatton were miners at different pits, part of their pay was by a load of coal, each year. When it arrived by lorry, it was dumped on the roadside, and everyone had a bucket to fill and carry to the coalshed. Then the road was swept clean. Mrs. Smith earned her money each week by taking in washing. On Monday morning early, she filled the copper and *lit* the gas to heat the water. She then washed all day till 5.30pm. On Tuesday someone else used the wash-house, which was in the centre of the yard. She then would start ironing all day, and part of the next day. Wednesday afternoon, I had to take a brown paper parcel of freshly ironed clothes to a large house. Hands had to be underneath so I did not crease anything. What hard days she had. Other memories are the very good fish and chips we had. There were 13 fish and chip shops in the town. Along the roads could be seen large lorries carrying big bales of wool for the hat trade. There was no television, so on Sunday everyone went for a stroll. Sometimes it was to the cemetery, to put new flowers on the grave or we went down the road to Church Walk, and sometimes on to the hounds of the Hunt at Witherly.

During raids we saw aircraft going over towards Coventry, but were not affected. At the end of the war, I came home to Coventry, with my parents, and then there was a VE day teaparty in the street. As I had been away I did not know many children there. Then it was back to Stoke Council school and the 11 -plus exam.

Joan Schoon