

A Wartime Evacuee Remembers

Welcome to Norton in Hales

One day in late summer a long time ago, something very special happened in the village of Norton in Hales. It was so special that it affected almost everyone there, including the children. To the ordinary folk of the village, it must have seemed like any other day in late summer; cows were brought in from dew drenched fields to be milked and the harvest was well underway. Children, who normally chattered and argued and laughed on their way to school in the village, were still enjoying their long summer break. Few could have foreseen how the events of that day would affect the lives of everyone there, from the humblest homestead to the large country houses and farms.

The day was the 1st September 1939; children in towns and cities all over the country had been raised from their beds to embark on journeys that would change the lives of many of them. Britain was on the threshold of war and it was feared that cities like Manchester might be bombed by enemy aircraft. Mums and dads and even the Government feared for the children's safety, so it was decided to send them away to the country until the danger had passed; it was called 'Evacuation' and the children became known as 'Evacuees' of which I was one.

There were seven in our family, five boys and two girls whose ages ranged from four to eleven. Soon after breakfast, mam took the seven of us to school where we joined other children and teachers waiting to be taken by bus to the railway station. Thousands of children were sent to all parts of the country and it was our good fortune with fifty other Manchester children, to be sent to Norton in Hales.

We had been on the move since just after breakfast and by the time we arrived in the village it was late afternoon. Our teachers helped us off the buses and showed us into the school playground where we were given a cup of warm tea and a biscuit. There was an air of excitement inside the school which was crammed with chattering people. The village had never seen anything like it before. Most of the people there lived in the village but a few came from farther afield. Some had boys and girls of their own but some had no children at all. They had come to the school that day because they wanted to help and before the end of the afternoon, almost everyone took one or two children to live in their homes.

As I have already said, there were seven of us and as no one could take a family of seven, we had to be split up. The four eldest boys – Albert, Eddie, Ken and Sydney were taken to live on Mr.Swire's dairy farm at Bellaport. Our sisters, Violet and Edith, were taken by Mr.and Mrs.Davies, a kindly Welsh couple who also lived at Bellaport. Mr.Davies was Mr.Swire's ploughman. Raymond our youngest brother went to live with Mr.and Mrs.Sam Swire who lived with their children on their poultry farm nearby.

We were feeling quite famished by the time we arrived at Bellaport Farm and under the glow of an old oil lamp we sat at a long kitchen table for supper. By now we were just about ready to fall into bed and by the light of a flickering candle the four of us climbed a steep flight of stairs to a bedroom over the dairy.



Bellaport Hall Farm with the tower - later demolished.

It was barely light when we awoke on the following morning. A cockerel crowed in the yard outside and loud clanging noises mixed with the sound very strange voices were coming from under our bedroom window.

We quickly dressed and dashed downstairs. Mrs.Tugwood, who was Mr.Swire's housekeeper called out from the kitchen. *"Come on you lads; sit yourselves down and get some breakfast inside you."* It was an unfamiliar breakfast of porridge and instead of our usual cup of hot tea, we each had a glass of fresh milk. Albert dared to suggest that the milk had been watered down. *"Watered down!"* scoffed an indignant Mrs.Tugwood. *"What stuff and nonsense! It's not come out of a bottle you know! You lads from the town are not used to milk coming straight from the cow."*

"Before you go out" Mrs.Tugwood told Albert, *"You'd better write home and let your parents know where you are."* Albert breathed an impatient sigh and though his mind was on more urgent things such as exploring the farm, he dutifully sat down at the table. Mrs.Tugwood gave him some paper, a pen and a bottle of ink and he hurriedly scribbled a note.

Once outside we crossed the farmyard in the middle of which was a mountain of muck. *"Phew, what a pong"* said our Ken as we skirted around it to enter a building where we found a long line of cows, standing in stalls with chains round their necks. *"This must be the cowshed said Albert."* No it inna said a hidden voice from among the cows. *"It inna the cowshed lad, it's the shippin."* The voice belonged to a white-coated man who was sat on a stool by the side of a cow with a bucket wedged tight between his knees.

"Where've yo lot cum from?" he asked. *"We've cum from Manchester."* said Albert proudly. *"From Manchester!"* sneered the man. *"Inna that where it's allus rainin'?"* *"Is it 'eck"* replied Albert indignantly. *"Well wot are yun all doin 'ere?"* asked the man. *"We're evacuees"* I said. *"They've sent us 'ere so we won't get killed by the bombs."* *"Bombs! What bombs un they?"* asked the man. *"I anna 'eard un no bombs."* *"The bombs that Hitler's gonna drop on Manchester"* I said.

We left the shippin and went down the fields where the harvest was in full swing. As most men worked on the farms, their children helped with the harvest. It was all very new to us and at first we chased each other about; but soon we were helping like everyone else, stacking the sheaves of corn into stooks ready to be taken by horse and cart to the stack yard back at

the farm.



Evacuees and local children help with the harvest

Among my more interesting discoveries in the first few days was the humble country privy which stood in a row of outbuildings. I went through a green painted door on which was scrawled 'WC'. It was empty except for a wide wooden bench, scrubbed white with a large black hole in the middle. I looked down the hole and into the darkness below. Coal black and silent as night, it seemed as deep as a well. Every few seconds the silence was broken by an echoing drip. It was scary!

I took off my trousers and hung them up on the back of the door, then nervously perched myself over the hole in the bench. Frightened I might fall into the hole, I held on tight to a piece of rough twine that was hooked to a nail on the wall. Onto the twine was threaded some crudely torn newspaper squares. I sat there perfectly still in the meagre light that filtered in through the gaps round the door, too frightened to move for fear the monster might swallow me up. The prospect of going through this dreadful ordeal every time I wanted to go to the lavvy filled me with horror and it was with more than a little relief that I stepped back into my threadbare pants to resume more agreeable pursuits.



It was Sunday morning the 3rd September, when Mrs.Tugwood called the four of us into the kitchen. She told us that Mr.Chamberlain, the Prime Minister had been on the wireless to say that Britain was at war with Germany. The news didn't mean much to us as everything seemed to be normal, but everyone else seemed to think it was grim.

Apples!

When I was a boy before the war, apples were a luxury we couldn't afford. If I saw a boy eating an apple at school I often asked for the core and if I was lucky, he might give it to me. I also asked our greengrocer if he had any bad apples to spare; but all that changed when we came to Norton in Hales.

One day when I was wandering round the farm with Ken we met a young boy and a girl. "Are you the vannies from Manchester?" asked the girl with a quizzical smile. "Aye, that's right" I admitted. The boy gave us a searching look with an uncertain frown on his face. He wanted to move on but the girl was keen to know more. "What are your names?" she asked. "I'm Eddie and this is our Kenny" I responded. "My name's Jean and this is our Michael; we live on the poultry farm over there" she said pointing through the trees. "Where d'you live?" she enquired with dancing eyes. "We're stayin' over there at Mr.Swire's farm" I said nodding in the direction from which we had come, which seemed to break the ice with the boy. "That's our uncle Tom's" he said, now looking more at ease.

The four of us chatted as they led the way through a rickety gate and into a small field of trees. "This is our orchard" the girl said proudly. Ken and I stopped dead in our tracks. We could hardly believe our eyes; everywhere we looked there were apples. Hanging on trees and scattered about all over the ground. We had never seen so many apples before and had to tread carefully to avoid stepping on them. "Are we allowed to pick 'em?" I asked. "Y'can pick as many as y'like" said the boy, "They're only windfalls." Ken looked at me with a mischievous grin on his face and without more ado we were stuffing our trouser pockets with apples. The boy and his sister laughed and looked on in disbelief. "You'd better watch out for the wasps" said the boy, *Y'dunna want t'get stung.* But it was too late; the menacing wasps were swarming all round our legs and though we ran from the angry beasts, we couldn't avoid getting stung.

Mention of wasps reminds me of the farmhouse kitchen which was a fascinating place. It was dominated by a long white-wood table which stood on a flagstone floor. From a hook in the ceiling a large oil lamp hung over the table. There were numerous hooks in the ceiling, used in the past for hanging cured hams. The wide kitchen window looked onto the garden and beyond a low hedge, green fields stretched into the distance. On the window sill was an upturned glass standing in a shallow bowl of golden liquid. It was swarming with wasps that were writhing and struggling to get themselves free – but to no avail. The unfortunate creatures were inescapably caught in Mrs.Tugwood's wasp trap which held the four of us entranced.

We Go To Church and Join the Choir

We had been at Bellaport three or four weeks when Mrs.Tugwood decided it was time we went to church. Shortly after breakfast one Sunday, we did as she bid – to: *...have a good wash - and don't forget to wash your neck and do behind your ears.*” We would have looked a sorry sight had she sent us to church in the worn out clothes we arrived in – but she didn't. Without breathing a word to anyone she had made us some trousers from Mr.Swire's old riding breeches and as a special treat, she brushed some of his sweet smelling brilliantine oil into our hair; pleased with the result, she sent us off to church. It was a mile and a half by road to church at Norton in Hales, but only a *“cock stride”* if we went by the fields, so we braved the cows and the cow pats and went by the fields



Mrs.Tugwood

The service was unfamiliar to us, especially the canticles and psalms, so we were pleased when it came to an end. For a little while after the service people lingered outside the church, greeting each other with smiles and friendly nods of recognition and chatting in the shade of an old yew tree. Some talked of the war and some about farming, but what they talked about most was us – the evacuees who arrived in the village at very short notice. Each had their own experience to tell, some good, some bad and all very different.

While we were standing outside the church a purposeful lady came striding towards us. She asked us our names and told us that she was Mrs.Keay who, as well as being the village postmistress was the organist in charge of the choir. *“Can any of you lads sing?”* she asked hopefully. *“I can sing a bit”* muttered Albert, a little embarrassed, *“and so can our Eddie. We were both in the choir in Manchester.”* Mrs.Keay's face lit up. *“Good!”* she beamed, *“then perhaps you'd like to sing in our little choir.”* We grinned at each other and shrugged our shoulders which she took to be our acceptance.



L-R: Albert and Edward Gill with Leslie Fitzgerald and the Rector Rev.J.M.Cullimore in 1940

The Village School

For the first few months we had our own school in the old rectory, but the arrangement was proving far from ideal. Also the Rector thought it divisive for children from town and country to be taught in separate schools in the village; so the evacuees of primary school age were absorbed into the village school under its headmistress Miss Mycock. The school consisted of one large room, divided in two by a screen in the middle. One half of the school was used by the infants and the other half used by the older children. Going to Norton village school was one of the most enriching experiences of my life.



Miss Mycock, the village school head-teacher

In those days we had a village shop which was kept by old Mrs.Ransford; well she seemed old to us. She had a son called Jim who was the village blacksmith and whose forge stood under a chestnut tree behind the village shop. People

brought their horses from miles around to be shod by Jim, and although they said he was strong as an ox, he was gentle and quiet as a lamb when it came to handling horses.

Often on our way home from school, we children loved to stop at the forge to watch the blacksmith at work and hear the anvil ring; and breathe the smell of the burning hoof as the smoke swirled round the blacksmith's head. He wore a brown leather apron, and the sleeves of his open-necked shirt were rolled right up to his elbows. Giving a horse a gentle pat, he would run his gnarled fingers across its hindquarters. "*This one owd mon*" he would murmur as his sensitive hand moved down its hind leg and over its hock to its fetlock. Most horses quietly lifted their feet when he got to the fetlock, but sometimes he came on an uppity one that pranced and danced like a yearling. Yet even the liveliest ones soon settled down with a little persuasion from Jim.

We got on well with the local lads and it wasn't too long before we adopted their Shropshire dialect. On meeting we greeted each other with "*Wotcha!*" and said "*Ah dunna know!*" or "*Dunna do that!*" and "*No Ah canna!*" or "*wunna.*" Home became "*wom*" and the sisters we always called girls we now knew as "*wenches*". Instead of washing we "*weshed*" and kids who said they were cold were "*nesh*".



St.Chad's Church with Mrs.Ransford's shop on the left

When crossing the fields to school one day we spontaneously renounced our Mancunian roots. Shouting for all the world to hear we proclaimed: "*We are proud Salopians! We are proud Salopians!*" To further emphasise our claim to be four "*Shropshire Lads*" we chanted in unison as we tripped through the fields: "*Ah canna, Ah shanna, Ah wunna, Ad dunna. Ah canna, Ah shanna, Ah wunna, Ah dunna.*" But for us the local dialect was the language of the playground; we used it constantly among ourselves and our friends, including the local children. Except for the men who worked on the farms we seldom extended its use to grown-ups.



L-R: Albert, Sydney, Edward, Kenneth and Raymond in front – Bellaport 1939

Drayton Market

Wednesday each week was market day, as it still is, when farming folk from miles around flocked into Market Drayton. Mr.Tom and Mrs.Tugwood were making their weekly trip into town and as we had not seen a market before, she asked us if we would like to go.

Though most farmers went to market to buy or to sell, some just went to meet up with friends or relations. People went in from all over the place on bikes, on foot and by car. Some of the cars towed trailers to take in a pig, a sheep or a cow. It was mostly ladies that went in on bikes with small wicker baskets strapped onto the back. The baskets contained all kinds of produce – home-grown and home- made such as honey and jam or maybe a fruit cake or a few new laid eggs to sell on the W.I. stall in the market.

Wandering through long lines of livestock, we were fascinated by the strange collection of animals and people. A hand bell summoned the farmers to the auction ring where buyers and sellers waited for the first beast to enter the ring. The iron gate into the ring clanged open and voices outside persuaded a nervous young heifer in. The heifer pirouetted awkwardly round the ring as the auctioneer called for the farmers to make their first bid. The bidding was slow and discreet from furtive farmers trying to hide their interest from each other. Nor would it do to let the auctioneer think they were overly keen. A nod of the head or a touch of the cap was enough to signal a bid. The secretive bidding continued for several minutes before finally reaching its limit. For the last time the auctioneer appealed to their impassive faces in an effort to wring out just one more bid before bringing the hammer down on his desk to sell the beast to the successful bidder.



The Auctioneer at Drayton Market

Our sojourn at Bellaport proved all too brief. Mrs. Tugwood called the four of us into the kitchen one day to tell us we would soon have to leave. Mr. Swire was going to be married and would need all the space in the house for his own family use. We received the news with feelings of sadness; coming here had changed our lives. We would miss the smell of the farmhouse kitchen and the soft silent glow of the paraffin lamp. But most of all we would miss the animals, especially the two mischievous foxhounds that Mr. Swire 'walked' for the hunt.



Mr. Swire with the lady who would soon be his wife

Betton

It seemed we were faced with an uncertain future, but as it turned out we had little to fear. Our new home was to be Betton House, the home of the Hon. Mrs. Heathcote, a tweedy elderly lady whose constant companion was a pampered rough coated hound called Otto. Our first Christmas at Betton will be remembered for the wonderful time we had there. We had never experienced the real joys of Christmas before. Presents were unheard of in our house; Christmas had always come in the form of our Sunday School party. But that very first Christmas at Betton was different. Mr. Lowe the gardener brought a tree in from the woods which we festooned with streamers and tinsel. For the first time ever on Christmas morning there were presents at the bottom of our beds.

Sadly, our stay was all too short, for in the middle of January, Mrs. Heathcote was taken ill and died. When Mr. Chadwick, the Billeting Officer came to see us, he asked us where we would like to live and without hesitation we said "Betton Hall!" We had been there on Boxing Day for tea with Mrs. Crompton who said she would take us.

Betton Hall had plenty of space, enough to allow us our own living quarters. We were placed in the care of Miss Rosemary, the eldest of Mrs. Crompton's two daughters. She had led a somewhat sheltered life so the challenge of taking on four lads like us must have been pretty daunting for a young lady still in her twenties. She would quickly assume the role of our mother from the moment we got up in the mornings, to the time we sank into our beds at night. Most mothers have the advantage of coming to the role gradually, but not Miss Rosemary, she was thrown in at the deep end – head first. She supervised every aspect of our lives – our meals, our clothes, our washing and bathing and even cleaning our teeth, which we were not in the habit of doing. She was also the guardian of our spiritual well-being as well as our education. What we lacked in good manners, and we lacked a good deal, she taught us how to behave. It was she who laid the foundations of what we would be in the years ahead.



*After the war Miss Rosemary entered a convent where she remained for over fifty years.
My brothers and I never lost touch with her to the day she died in 2006*

Betton Hall had a lake that was fed by a stream meandering unhurried through osier beds. At one end was an old

wooden boathouse, so we ventured inside and discovered a raft on which we were sure we could reach the two islands that beckoned us out to explore them. The fish would rise on warm lazy days making tell tale rings in the water; a clear invitation to budding young anglers and with bent pin and cork on the end of some string we idled the hours away fishing. These were the unforgettable, 'Wind in the Willows' days of our childhood. "Believe me my young friend there is nothing, absolutely nothing half so much worth doing as messing about in boats."

The Long Arctic Winter of 1940

Our first winter at Betton brought the worst snow for years. Early one January morning we left our beds and looked through the window onto a silent white world that was quilted with snow. The cedars looked truly enchanting with their branches sagging beneath the white mass; not until we ventured outside did we realise how deep it was. The wind had blown the snow into drifts that looked like huge waves about to crash on the shore. We were completely snowbound and in the grip of what would be a long hard winter. There was little or no sign of life outside and the stable yard was silent as Sunday; except for the footprints of animals and birds, the mantle of snow lay untouched. The kitchen garden nestled beneath a thick white cloak with the greenhouses totally hidden from view. Even the telegraph poles were lost in the drifts and all we could see was the telephone wires that made weird sounds as the wind whistled through them.

There had been a good deal of frost since Christmas and by now the lake was covered with ice. Its thickness was carefully tested and declared safe for skating, but in spite of the confident assurance, we ventured onto its surface with care. From time to time a loud cracking sound echoed across the frozen expanse, prompting a judicious move to the edge.

Water pipes froze all over the house and the grown-ups didn't like it at all. They hoped every day that a thaw might set in but to our delight the weather was quite unrelenting. The winter seemed to go on for weeks until news filtered through that workmen were digging to open the road from Market Drayton.



The Norton road at Betton – Winter 1940

When the road to Norton in Hales was reopened we were able to go back to school. Because of the wintry weather, we only attended for a few hours each day, starting late and finishing early. In spite of the physical exertion of trekking from Betton, we arrived feeling bitterly cold and vied with the village children to get near the stoves and hang our damp clothes on the fireguards to dry.

The air was noticeably warmer as we moved into March and the crisp snow of yesterday started to feel decidedly soft. The lake took on a blue-grey hue of thawing ice as moorhens and mallard took tentative steps on the melting mass, seeking places to swim and find food.

Day by day the sun gathered strength and the woods that had worn the white cloak of winter now changed to a carpet of snowdrops then primrose.



Betton Hall from across the lake

So far our lives had hardly been touched by the war, but one night we found ourselves right in the line of enemy fire. We had not been in bed very long when the air was filled with the unmistakable throb of enemy aircraft. For a while we lay in our beds, tense and apprehensive until the high pitched scream of a falling bomb was enough to convince us it was time to seek safety downstairs. We hardly had time to get out of bed when a huge explosion shook the house. It bounced the four of us out of our beds and onto the floor. Two more explosions followed in quick succession shaking the house to its very foundations. I felt sure they had landed in the garden. The house was now in a state of alert, but everyone was calm, and with blankets draped round our shoulders, we were calmly taken downstairs to the entrance hall where we took shelter under the stairs.

The long beams of searchlights combed the night sky as our anti-aircraft guns pounded the air. RAF Spitfires whined in pursuit of the hostile intruders and the rat-a-tat-tat of machine gun fire could be heard overhead. It was not too hard for the

romantic mind of a boy of my age to imagine the exciting ‘dog fights’ going on in the sky above.

The End of An Era

We romped through the butter-cupped meadows of childhood unaware the war that was changing our lives was changing forever the lives of the people around us. The long established social order, dented by the First World War, was crumbling under the pressure of the Second. Change posing as progress was rapidly transforming life in the country. In little more than another decade the tractor would replace the horse on the farm and the combine harvester would bring to an end the carefree, sweet-smelling hay-time and harvest we knew.

Although the village today seems much the same as it was in those far off days, in fact it has changed quite a lot. The shop that stood on the village green is now an ordinary house, and sadly the blacksmith’s forge is no more. Gone too are the local mole-catchers; there were three in Norton in Hales, Tom, Will and Harry Hamlet who were brothers.



Norton in Hales Molecatchers - Will and Tom Hamlet

The people who live in this quiet backwater of Shropshire are fortunate indeed. It is a place where time has ticked a little slower, but though it has the appearance of having changed little in the years I have known it, it has not gone untouched by the passage of time.

Dependent for centuries on a farming economy, it has experienced its share of the rural revolution that has taken place since two world wars. Few men now toil in the fields as their fathers and grandfathers did and many who were born and bred on the land have left to seek their fortunes elsewhere.

Gradually the character of the village is changing as people without rural roots move in. Their children share the village school with descendants of families that have been taught there for generation upon generation. Mercifully this school survives in an age when many have fallen victim to harsh economic expediency and political folly.

This little village with so many like it embodies the spirit of England. Guard it well and do not take it for granted. There are those today who look with envy on what you have here – not that they want it themselves, but rather they do not wish to preserve it. War memorials all over Britain are filled with the names of men and women who gave their lives to defend the way of life you are privileged to enjoy in this village; let it never be said that they died in vain.



*The Railway Station at Norton in Hales – closed in the 1950s.
Note the milk churns on the platform; they were collected early each morning and taken to Pipe Gate Creamery.*

In September 1999, members of my family came to the village to commemorate with the people of Norton in Hales, the 60th Anniversary of the evacuation. There was a service of thanksgiving in the church and afterwards we were generously entertained to a buffet lunch in the home of Mel and Joyce Rees.

Because we felt the children should know something of the important contribution made by their village to the war effort in 1939, each child in the village school was presented with a commemorative mug and a copy of ‘*The Evacuees*’, a short account of the evacuation specially written for and addressed to the children.



*Members of the Gill family at the 1999 reunion in Norton in Hales
L-R: Toni Gill and husband Albert, Violet Nuttal nee Gill, and husband Colin Nuttal
Edith Rothwell nee Gill, Edward Gill, Jackie Gill and husband Ken.*