

Memories of an evacuee in Robertsbridge, 1939/40. Roy Pickett

Our family were on holiday in August 1939, when we heard that war was imminent and that the evacuation plan was already being implemented. That plan was to keep families together as far as possible and I, just 9 years old, was to go with my elder brother Victor. He was a 15-year-old student at the South East London Technical Institute, which had been sent to Robertsbridge. My parents rushed back to London, washed and named our clothes, and we arrived in Robertsbridge on Saturday September 2nd, two days later than the rest. By then all available 'billets' had been allocated. A highly-stressed school staff, who were now worrying about how to deliver modern engineering courses in a church hall, were firmly reminded by my Dad that two of their charges had nowhere yet to sleep, and asked what were they doing about it. Fortunately for all, especially us, a Mrs. Church from Salehurst volunteered to have us for a few weeks whilst more permanent arrangements were made. Dad drove us the mile or so to Salehurst, and then rushed back to London promising all concerned that he would be back to see the 'more permanent arrangements' in a few weeks' time.

With Mrs Church, we could not have been luckier. She had a family of her own, including a couple of girls about our age and some older sons. Things were rearranged to allow Vic and me to share a bed in their cottage. I don't remember Mr. Church at all, but our new foster mother was wonderful – just like Pam Ferris' character, Ma Larkin, in the BBC adaptation of H E Bates' novel 'The Darling Buds of May'. All problems were first to be laughed about and then to be swept aside.

We arrived as I said on the 2nd September. That I can remember all this in such great detail, as if it was yesterday, is proof if needed of how scared we all were. That night there was the mother and father of all thunderstorms, which in a strange place and with no street lights seemed to me as though it was the apocalypse. The next day we gathered with the adults around the wireless at 11 am to hear the result of the Prime Minister's ultimatum to Hitler (get out of Poland or we are at War.) The recording has been played many times; Mr. Chamberlain's voice still echoes in my mind, "I have to say that I have received no such assurance and that therefore, a state of war exists between ourselves and Germany...." followed by the National Anthem. God save us all! And then, whilst the grown-ups were still talking in very serious voices about what this all meant, an air raid warning sounded. It was a false alarm but it was a very sobering experience. Vic and I were obviously not going home yet.

The Rother Valley then was fruit and vegetable land and September was the time to get the hop and tree fruit harvest in. Everyone was busy and we couldn't be left, so we went to the hop fields with Mrs. Church and her children. They were allowed to help, or to play around the hedgerows as the mood took them, and Vic and I went with them. The hops were grown on 3-metre-long hazel poles and strings. They were cut down row by row and brought to the pickers who stood in front of large wooden-framed cloth bins. The hops were stripped off the 'bine' by hand and the waste carted off when the next lot arrived. Many of the pickers were from London and came each year. They were housed in some temporary buildings down by the river. The pickers were paid according to the quantity picked, measured in bushels (36 litres). We often would join in the picking for an hour or two, and the bitter, tarry exudation very quickly stained our fingers black. But the banter between the pickers was an education for our sheltered ears. This was a different world.

Most of the time though we were robbing the hedgerows of blackberries, tasting the wide variety of apples in the neighbouring orchards, or collecting itching powder from the furry insides of ripe rose hips to put in each others pyjamas.

Mrs Church's cottage was one of a row opposite the Old Eight Bells Pub in Salehurst. They were up a flight of steps from the road. There were two pumps, a washing water pump in the back garden, and a drinking water pump outside the house in the road, which served the whole row of cottages. Both Vic and I were pressed into service carrying water, though we never had to move the loo - which was a portable wooden shelter placed over a hole in the ground – that was men's work. Across the road was a tiny sweet shop where as I will tell you later I nearly obtained a criminal record. There was also the pub, and then the entrance to the farm. The road turned sharp left in front of the fine Norman church. In 1996 the pump and the sweet shop had gone and the pub had been converted into houses (*still a pub, now called The Salehurst Halt Ed.*) but I was delighted to find that the rest was all still there, just as I remember it.

Our permanent accommodation took about three weeks to arrange and when that happened it resulted in my brother and I being separated, but there were a few steps in between. After a week or two Vic and I were sent off to a miserly couple at the top of the hill (Silver Hill?) about 2 miles up the

London Road in Hurst Green. This lady who shall be nameless required us to pick potatoes for which the farmer gave her the money, and since our only clothes were our school things, they were not in very good shape when Dad came to see 'the more permanent arrangements' at the weekend. I should have loved to have witnessed the resulting encounter between Dad and Vic's headmaster in the pub. As it was, we sat outside munching a bag of crisps. Apparently, the head said that he had enough on his plate without having to cope with "interfering parents", at which comment Dad went ballistic. They came out, being polite to each other, the one pale and drawn and the other flushed and serious but with a distinct twinkle in the eye.

It was now the third week in September but school did not start until October. I joined the village school at the end of Church Lane where Colin also attended. Vic's school struggled to get their technical courses off the ground, but it was never going to work. Robertsbridge had nowhere that could house an engineering college. Arrangements had been made to transfer the school to Loughborough Technical College near Leicester. The decision then had to be faced as to what should happen to me.

I had finally been placed with Mrs. Stace. Her council cottage was in Church Lane Salehurst again, only 2-300 yards from where we started. It was part of a group of Council houses called Coronation Cottages built only two or three years before. She was an older person with a son Colin two days older than me, who had arrived very late in her life. He and I became very good friends. Their house had a fairly large living room, a kitchen with a bath in it and a drop-down board to cover it and provide a work surface when not in use. There were I think two bedrooms. Colin and I shared one and Mr. and Mrs. Stace the other.

I was consulted, which still surprises me when I think about it. What I wanted - given that I could not return home - was to stay where I was. I liked Mrs. Stace, and her son Colin and I were already getting on fine. But I never expected anyone to agree. Dad was out of work by now, wartime austerity having squeezed his employers, and I think he foresaw the possibility of having to move to find work. It cannot have been easy to maintain a family spread all over England, but realistically, the option of my returning to London was not on. Apart from the perceived, if not real danger, the schools just were not open and if I was going to be happier in Robertsbridge, where I now had a kindly 'billetor' with a son the same age, let's go with the flow.

Whether this is what was really going on in their minds is of course conjecture, but anyway, early in October Vic went off, and I settled down in Coronation Cottages. The Staces were an unconventional household. Mr. Stace was in his late seventies. He had been a large man, well over 6 feet tall, but was now bearded. As I remember it, he had been the Head Gardener of a large house near Robertsbridge. Then, when in his late fifties and twice a widower, he met Mrs. Stace, a personable, spry and lively spinster who had been appointed as the Cook. They married in 1927, but he was close to retirement before they had their only child Colin. Years of inclement weather had taken their toll and when he retired, he suffered from rheumatism, and almost totally disabling emphysema. He used to sit up in his bed by the parlour window and direct operations in the garden.

Colin and I were the gardeners, and it was from his wheezing instructions that during that winter, spring and early summer I learned to dig, "keep the spade upright boy!", and to sow, hoe and tend all the common vegetables. During their life 'in service' they had had free food and accommodation, but now in retirement they had no pension beyond the old age pension a very small honorarium from their employer. The Government allowance for me was a significant increase in their income.

So, economy was the order of the day. They lived off the land whenever possible as country folk do, and I had to help. Mrs. Stace was a wonderful cook and nobody I have met since could conjure so much flavour out of so little. She directed our hunting and gathering as the old man did our gardening. Blackberries were collected whilst they lasted, and made into blackberry and apple preserve, to reappear as winter pie fillings; hazels and sweet chestnuts were gathered and stored for cakes and stuffings. Colin and I would put down lines in the river at night, and then before school pull in the eels, and gather a few mushrooms on the way back to the house. Fried in some lard flavoured with chopped bacon rinds, the eel steaks made a breakfast that certainly beat cornflakes. We also scrounged windfall apples and carefully stored the unmarked ones.

But this was harvest-time; winter was a bit more difficult. We still had to dig up the leeks, turnips, swedes and carrots, and pick the Brussels sprouts, as well as collect firewood, but things on the food front definitely went downhill for a while. Porridge made with water was not to my taste, though I ate it; I was hungry! I drew the line however at having leftover congealed porridge served the next day as fritters

fried in dripping! Colin was no help - he actually liked them. When rationing was introduced early in 1940, the first things rationed were meat, fats, butter, margarine and sugar. Mrs. Stace's wry comment was that she couldn't afford to buy all that anyway. Does this sound to you like privation? Well it wasn't. There was always enough, and apart from fried porridge it all tasted delicious. And although Mrs. Stace was an upright matter-of-fact lady, nowhere near as demonstrative as Mrs. Church, she was caring and warm, and really treated me as her own son. And I had already learned as a second child of 3 that you cannot have your own way all that often anyway.

I think the population of Robertsbridge then was around 2000 (*Pop. 2624 in 2001 census Ed.*). It was nevertheless a bustling, thriving little town. The main street was the A21 London/Hastings road, and it had a main line railway station where the Hastings train stopped on its way to 'Royal Tunbridge Wells' and Sevenoaks and thence to London. Much more fun though was the little branch line that wandered from Robertsbridge station along the Rother valley to Tenterden. It had a 'Puffing Billy' engine with a tall funnel made famous by Will Hay in the film "Oh! Mr. Porter". It crossed the main road at a level crossing near the school and was a great favourite with all the kids.

At Robertsbridge the Rother was about 12/15 metres wide and turned a huge water wheel for the mill. At the north end of the main street was the blacksmith's, an open fronted building where two smiths made and fitted horseshoes and repaired tools and farm implements. There was no power apart from the blacksmith's arm. The fire was reddened by hand bellows and all the steel was beaten into shape on an anvil. Heads for rakes, hoes, pitchforks and bits of twirly wrought iron were hung around the eaves, and over all was a covering of black iron dust and ash from the fire. It was truly a 'devils kitchen', and fascinating to a nine-year-old.

Further south the road gently climbed towards the George Hotel and along the east side, the pavement rose up above the road. In the row of shops there was a large grocer's. It was owned, I was told, by the relatives of three famous radio and later, T.V. comedians. The two sisters used their own surnames, Elsie and Doris Waters, and the more famous brother called himself Jack Warner. They were born in the east end of London and I have never been able to confirm this story so it may be entirely false. This shop was also a delight There were large bins along the front of the counter which contained all sorts of dried foods sold loose, peas, beans and lentils, biscuits in their metal tins, brown and white sugar, dried fruits, raisins sultanas. There was a hand bacon slicer and rashers were cut to order. On the dairy counter the counter hand would do his star turn with the butter pats. These were wooden paddles, patterned on one side and flat on the other, with which he would cut off a half pound of butter, and with great flourishes and much tossing in the air, form it into the standard shape you now buy, only his would have that pattern with the shop's name embossed on it.

Shopping is still a visual experience but then it engaged all your senses and particularly the sense of smell. In those days' you could walk along any high street and identify the grocers, butchers, greengrocers, hardware store and many others completely blindfolded. Supermarkets are altogether more convenient, but they are nowhere near as much fun. The butcher was not just a meat retailer; he had a slaughterhouse at the back and meat in the shop that could have been walking around a farm yesterday, where he would have chosen it personally. He had known Mrs. Stace for years, and we would carry him little notes with strict instructions about the meat she wanted and the price she could afford. Once she came back triumphant with a bullock's heart 'off ration'. He had kept it for her, because even then few knew how to cook one. She stuffed it with breadcrumbs, sage, onion and chopped nuts and roasted it very slowly. When it emerged, it was delicious, and of course large enough to feed us for several days.



Salehurst School Photo 1939/40

The school catered for all the local children from 5 to 13. But it only had four classrooms and a hall that could be divided with a glazed partition. The picture of me was taken in the spring as I remember along with all the other children. It was here that I first encountered 'Window-breakers'. These were the mushroom shaped tops that you start and keep spinning with a whip. I had seen, (but never owned) the turnip shaped variety, where you start them with a piece of string wound on grooves in the body of the top. With them it was just a case of seeing how long they would spin for. But these peg tops, as they are properly called, in skilled hands could be made to jump several feet and still come down spinning away. In ordinary hands, however... well that's how they got their other name!

One of the best things at Robertsbridge was learning how to fish. Vic had left me his fishing rod, a cheap one in two sections with a simple reel, float and line and a few hooks. Colin had one too and we used to go to the Rother and fish at weekends or when the evenings were light. Nobody cared about licences or about closed seasons for kids like us, and we had great sport trying to hook dace or roach before they had time to take our bait and disappear.

Salehurst was my first real experience of church. Colin used to get sixpence a month for pumping the church organ on Sunday. This meant he had to be there both for matins and for evensong every Sunday. Neither Mum nor Dad ever went to church and did not require us to go either so I knew only the bible stories we had been taught at school.

I used to go with Colin and occasionally he would let me pump the organ which was fun. It was a wheezy old machine long since replaced and you had to be very careful not to make rude noises with it during the quieter parts of the service. But of course, it also meant that I got used to the services and listened to the vicar's sermon each week. It was all very good for me I expect.

Soon it was Christmas, and I was to travel on my own on the Maidstone and District Bus Company coach to Catford. I was used to seeing the green bus drive through Robertsbridge and knew by heart the itinerary from the board on the side - Hurst Green, Hawkhurst, Lamberhurst, and eventually Sevenoaks, Farnborough, Bromley, Catford. Today's high-speed coaches would do the journey in an hour, but then it took most of the morning. I enjoyed the adventure of travelling on my own, the first of many like it during the war, and arrived without mishap to be met by Mum. That Christmas I remember with very mixed emotions. I was excited, and delighted to see everyone again of course, but it was not an easy time for anybody. I now know that people were beginning to realise this war might be just as difficult as the previous one, and I suppose I was affected a bit by the general foreboding. Although rationing had not started, many things were difficult to find. London was 'blacked-out' - no street lights, windows covered with opaque cloth, the glass criss-crossed with sticky paper tape to prevent it from flying around, car headlamps shaded with special metal shades.

What I remember most though is a feeling of not quite belonging anymore, and it was disturbing. The family had been doing things that I had not been part of. Mum and Dad had written letters of course and I wrote back; simple stuff though - what else to a nine-year old - mainly to send me my pocket money. But feeling 'semi-detached' was unnerving and was an experience I have never forgotten.

We had our usual Capon and Dad found a Christmas tree and before long I was on the bus back to Robertsbridge. The winter of 1939/40 was one of the hardest I remember. It snowed and snowed and snowed. We were unable to walk the ½ mile down the lane to school because it would have been over our heads in places. And this was not for one or two days but for a week or more. We cleared paths, made snowmen, had grand pitched battles with piles of snowballs that we had prepared, made slides until we were thoroughly fed up with the whole thing. The snow hung around for about a month and then with February came heavy rains. That and the thaw meant that we now needed a boat to get to school. More disruption. Delightful! I had never seen anything to match this. The whole valley had joined the river to make one huge lake half a mile wide, not just for a few hours, but for a week. That winter I lived in my Wellies.

By the spring, the signs were there for anybody who wanted to see them that things were getting serious. The Land Defence Force (LDF), later to be called the Home Guard (Dad's Army), was formed. Teams of soldiers were constantly practising around us. The north bank of the river Rother was made into a continuous wall of vertical logs to prevent tanks fording it, and the concrete pill boxes that you can still see around Southern England were springing up everywhere. All the able bodied in our cluster of Council houses dug a big hole on the green, about where Rotherview becomes Coronation Cottages. It was 7 ft. deep, lined and covered with pine poles and then we heaped all the earth back on top. This was to be our air raid shelter!

I was still enjoying the Sussex countryside birds-nesting, fishing, rebuilding last autumn's now derelict camp in the woods, and learning to grow vegetables, all with my friend Colin. It was about this time that I tried my hand at shoplifting. There was a group of boys who lived at Salehurst who seemed very grown up, but they were what I would now recognise from a mile away as trouble, what my mother would call "a bad lot". They had noticed that whenever you went into the Salehurst sweet shop the old lady who ran it heard the bell over the door, but took her time to come to the shop. This left plenty of time to pocket a tube of Rowntree's gums or some such off the counter. I was dared to go and do the same. But the woman wasn't stupid, had noticed the losses, and was waiting behind the curtain. We

had all tramped into the shop to make sure I didn't cheat, so all five of us were nabbed. Colin and I went through the rest of that day in a state of abject terror – there was no place to hide in such a small community. That evening the local Police Constable called to see us and of course Mrs. Stace. He was suitably stern and gave us a thorough talking to; including reminding us that we all relied on that shop for our sweets, there was no other near us, and that it was the only income of the widow who ran it. I felt terrible - a mixture of guilt, shame, and fear of what would happen to us. Then he said that he was well aware that this was the first time and equally aware that that was certainly not true of our 'friends' and so he was prepared to overlook it. ***But if it ever happened again.....*** As I sit here reliving that evening I can still feel the relief and gratitude. Suppose though that he had not been a kindly copper? Worse - suppose that I had not been caught? What might I have tried next? And then?..... We shall never know the answers to those questions, although we can guess. But it is sometimes on such chances that whole lives are changed. At all events, I had had a timely lesson and I suppose Mrs. Stace never did tell Dad; if she did he certainly never said so.

One last vivid memory of Robertsbridge was discovering the night sky. In Robertsbridge we were often out at night – every winter Sunday we walked back from the church by starlight. I was shown by Colin the main constellations which are impressive enough – how he knew them I have no idea, his Dad I suppose. On one outstanding evening, though, which must have been in November, I was able to see a meteor shower. The sky was alive with shooting stars streaking along until they burned out. As I remember it, it lasted for about 20 minutes; one of nature's spectaculars that those who live in cities never see.

By May 1940 things were happening in the Low Countries and then the defeat of the allies in France and then Dunkirk. Dad was working in Aldershot and had seen the Army return from Dunkirk. He thought invasion was inevitable and the family should be back together again. At the end of the summer term I went back home and stayed there, and did not return to Robertsbridge again until as a father myself in the 1990s.

If anyone who reads this knows what happened to Mr. and Mrs. Stace and their son Colin, I'd be really grateful if they would tell me. And may I say how grateful I was and still am for the way the village accepted and cared for us all. It could not have been easy. It was not easy for youngsters separated from their families, nor was it easy for those who were ordered to look after them. The fact that most of my memories are happy ones is proof if needed of how well it was done.

R. A. Pickett March 2017