

Recollections of the evacuation years from 1941-1944 by John Powell

These are edited recollections by John. He sent them to me (Peter Higgins) from his home in New South Wales, Australia, in 2007. They form a part of a wider document that John had evidently written about his life and times. It is evident to me that John had many friends from his schooldays right up until the time when, sadly, he died in August 2008 (also see “Where are they now” and an article about John written by Roger Watts also John’s recollections of school staff (People/staff section).

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In late August 1941 about 100 boys of my own age assembled with their parents – mainly mothers – at Portsmouth Town Station to take a train to Brockenhurst where the school had been evacuated in 1939. We were proudly wearing our new school uniform; navy blue jacket with badge over the breast pocket, grey flannel shorts and a black cap also displaying the school badge. I had my gas mask, a satchel for books and a suitcase containing clothing. I knew one or two other boys as they had attended Milton School; Geoff Poar is the only one whose name I recall – he lived opposite us in Dunbar Road and his father had been lost on HMS Hood. When we reached Brockenhurst a few of the boys went to local billets and the rest of us boarded a train for Lymington which was on a branch line and I ended up staying with a family in a small terraced house opposite Linden Lodge. At that time the government paid eight shillings a week to anyone willing to take in an evacuee and we were the first group of evacuees to arrive in the town – by 1941 the accommodation resources in Brockenhurst had just about been exhausted.

A few weeks later I was moved to a large house in New road owned by Mr & Mrs Benn – the former being a retired banker. I was joined there by John Parrott. The house was managed by Mr & Mrs Hignett (gardener/handyman and housekeeper/cook respectively) and it was they who looked after us – we only saw Mr & Mrs Benn each evening when we said good night to them.

The house had about 30 rooms – a far cry from our small terraced homes in Portsmouth. Most of the rooms were not in use and had furniture covered by white sheets – rather creepy as we went up to our bedrooms carrying a candle or torch and definitely not helped by an owl hooting in a tree outside our bedroom window. We used to leap into bed in case there was someone hiding underneath who might grab our ankles!

We lived next door to Linden Lodge – a house even bigger than ours – and billeted there were Ken Priddy and Hen Grimes. I cannot remember that there was much visiting between us but the two Kens had access to a Monopoly board a rather expensive popular game at the time and one afternoon John Parrott and I summoned up the courage to go and ask if we might borrow it. We rang the doorbell – we should probably have gone to the tradesmen’s entrance – and after some delay the door was opened by the butler! We stared at him but were unable to express our request before becoming overcome by an attack of nervous giggles. The butler closed the door and we fled.

Lymington was a very quiet town with a substantial population of retired people who were not short of cash. There was not a great deal to amuse small boys. There was a cinema but I cannot recall seeing any films there, although we were taken sometimes to a small hall opposite Brockenhurst Station. We spent a good deal of time working in the garden and I have always been ashamed to recall that I once said to John Parrott that as his hands were larger and rougher than mine he should do the heavier work while I watered the plants in the conservatory; where on earth did I acquire such airs? The school established a club in a house which was the HQ of the WVS and the ladies took the responsibility for keeping a watchful eye on our activities. It provided space in which homework could be done and games and hobbies pursued during the evenings and weekends.

I recall failing to screw the top on an ink bottle on one occasion and Mr Hignett spilt it on the floor whilst clearing the table – the contents spreading on a rather expensive carpet! Fortunately, it blended in with the

pattern of the carpet and was almost impossible to detect – but since that day I have always been careful to screw caps on to containers!

Almost everything was severely rationed in 1941 and I remember a woman pushing a small barrow of groceries. She had taken in six or seven evacuees in order to obtain the ration books, it was said. People were kind to us and I recall one dark, wet night when, perhaps, I was returning from a club and a woman said “Aren’t you one of the boys from Portsmouth? I’ll see that you get home safely”. Some nights we could hear heavy gunfire and explosions as Southampton was being bombed although I don’t think Lymington was ever attacked as the only installation of any military significance was the Wellworthy piston ring factory just outside town.

Each weekday morning we walked down the hill to Lymington Station to catch the train to school a journey that took about 30 minutes through typical new Forest spongy grasslands and heaths with wild ponies grazing and the mysterious Sway Tower on the skyline. The station waiting room and carriage compartments displayed the well known Southern Railway prints promoting holiday resorts with exotic names like Budleigh Salterton, Lyme Regis and Penzance. In the absence of adults there was a great deal of mayhem during each journey (**Ed:** not that youths worry about the presence of adults these days!!).

From the station we walked along a lane beside the railway to our school which consisted of a group of wooden buildings with a play area extending to the Sway Road, said to have been built during the Great War for the army. It had been used by Brockenhurst County School until they moved into modern accommodation on the other side of the village in 1939. There was a hall that also served as a dining room but facilities were extremely limited and life for the staff must have been very difficult. There were no laboratories or workshops and no gymnasium – for these activities we made use of the well equipped facilities at the new County School. The new school had highly polished parquet floors and we were not allowed to enter it unless we were wearing plimsolls; there was always an inspection parade on our arrival and any boy who had forgotten his soft shoes was sent back. The arrangements for sharing classrooms and timetabling must have required a good deal of give and take between the staff of each school and the arrangements must have been an uneasy one at times. We never felt particularly welcome at the school – although we were unaware of it Portsmouth had an unsavoury reputation among many outsiders as a den of vice and drunken sailors (**Ed:** surely not!!).

Billeting must have been quite a headache and several larger houses were taken over as hostels and managed by staff members and their wives. I doubt that we showed much gratitude at the time but the dedication of our teachers and their families is something that can only be admired. Teaching was truly a profession in those days.

The school buildings were constructed of timber and had been poorly maintained – they were just a collection of huts with planked floors. The only heating was provided by large anthracite stoves which were very tricky to manage because of their complex flue systems. Boys were delegated to fill the fuel scuttles, empty the ash pans and get the stoves going first thing in the mornings. Unless the flues were carefully adjusted dangerous carbon monoxide gas could poison the air in a classroom. This happened on a number of occasions and boys had to be carried out to be revived!

The school had the exclusive use of a large playing field a short distance from the station along the road to Lymington. I was never able to develop an interest in cricket or soccer and usually managed, together with a few other boys of like mind, to spend the morning or afternoon playing war games in a deep overgrown gully which ran beside the road. Mr Chatterton did some cricket coaching and one of his methods was to make us stand in a circle around him; he would then, without warning, hurl a ball at one of the boys and expect it to be caught. The objective was to dispel any fear of fast bowling but the exercise always terrified me and my incompetence soon enabled me to be excused to return to the war games.

A popular game played in the school cycle shed was Wally-up, a version of High Cockalorum. Several boys bent forward grabbing the wrist of the one in front then, one at a time the others sprinted and tried to land as far forward as possible on the line of backs. Because of the risk of injury this game was officially

banned but this did not stop us playing it. (Ed: and to think that nowadays they've banned conkers because of the risk of injury – the world's gone bonkers [as opposed to conkers].

Attached to the dining room was a kitchen in which the formidable Mrs Goodgame (Ed: also mentioned elsewhere on this site; what a formidable lady she seems to have been) and her band of helpers prepared a hot midday meal for the whole school. The rations were augmented by fresh vegetables which we grew in the extensive grounds of the County School. We sat down at long tables each with a master or prefect at its head who made sure that the food was dished out equitably. For sweets we sometimes had bread pudding or a steamed duff, but most days there was either rice, sago or tapioca pudding; a plate of the latter could be held upside down without any risk of it falling off. We had a reasonably good diet and it was supplemented by a half pint of milk, for which we paid a half penny, handed out during morning break. By pouring the cream from several of these into an empty milk bottle we were able to produce a lump of butter after about 10 minutes of vigorous shaking.

We were always hungry and would sometimes go into the village during the midday break and buy a freshly baked loaf of bread from the bakery by the watersplash. During one morning assembly the Headmaster spoke strongly against this and said any boy seen doing this would be punished. He was probably battling to hold up the reputation of the school against some of the local people who no doubt viewed the evacuees as a bunch of roughnecks from Portsmouth who lacked the manners to refrain from tearing loaves to pieces in the centre of the village.

Assignment to a class in each three-form entry was done according to the first letter of one's surname. At the end of each year boys were moved up or down according to academic performance. Strangely though, there was not as much movement as might have been expected given the randomness of the initial distribution and a majority of those who began in 1C progressed through to 2c, 3c and 4c including myself. It was sometimes said that the best teachers tended to be allocated to the A classes and there may have been some truth in this. My academic record was certainly mediocre and the only subject at which I excelled was chemistry, although I generally came bottom of the class in physics and mathematics – subjects I found totally baffling. The school certainly faced a very difficult period during the evacuation period with many of the younger masters leaving to join the armed services and a number of retired former members of staff voluntarily returned to the school in order to replace them.

Discipline was firm but quite benign on the whole. It was the practice for someone who had seriously misbehaved to be sent to stand outside the Headmaster's door where there was a clock. After ten minutes they could return to the classroom but if the Head emerged from his office during that time they would receive a caning – I don't think anyone but the Headmaster could administer a caning. I was only sentenced to this vigil once and fortunately the headmaster, Mr Jones, a scholarly and unassuming man was engrossed in his paperwork for the whole ten minutes. Perhaps he looked through the keyhole and waited for the miscreant to return to the classroom. One very strict disciplinarian was Mr Shackleton who shared the teaching of chemistry with Mr Chatterton. During laboratory lessons he would sometimes require misbehaving boys to hold a chair above their heads for a lengthy period, a practice that would certainly be frowned on today and would probably result in legal action. But during his classes we were often handling dangerous chemicals and he was no doubt anxious to avoid an accident resulting from someone fooling around.

Once or twice in each term we were allowed to return to Portsmouth for a weekend at home. There was a fast train from Brockenhurst at 15.56 but in order to catch this we had to seek permission from the master taking the last lesson to leave the school ten minutes early. This was generally, but not always granted; the standard of behaviour during the last class on a Friday tended to be exemplary. The next train was a slow one requiring a change at St Denys, a very boring station, followed by a long wait there for a connection. In the winter I arrived at Fratton Station in the total darkness of the blackout and then caught a trolley bus to Milton and let myself into the house with the latch key. Sometimes there were air raids and the atmosphere in the City was depressing to say the least, but at least I was home for two days. I remember being at home at New Year's Eve 1941 when all the war news seemed to be bad. "Auntie" Mabel, an always cheerful friend of the family, took me out onto the pavement at midnight and the two of us danced around a darkened lamp post. In May of that year the *Hood* had sunk during a battle with the Bismarck. The *Hood*

was commissioned from Portsmouth and it was a black day for the City when she sank – there were only 3 survivors. The blinds or curtains were drawn in the houses which had lost members of the family and almost every street contained several such houses. One of them was opposite us where Geoff Poar was now without a father.

My Uncle Will was very friendly with a childless couple who lived nearby. They took an interest in me and I sometimes went for a midday meal at weekends during which I would be provided with a small glass of beer. They always had bottles of beer on the table – something unknown in our house because my father preferred the conviviality of the public bar if he wanted a drink. This couple had a Webley air pistol and one day they showed me how to use it and sent me out with a gun and a packet of pellets (**Ed**: how times have changed – would you do that now?). In the rough ground on the far side of Baffins Pond I finally succeeded in bringing down a sparrow which fluttered helplessly on the ground. I placed the gun against its head and fired again thinking this would kill it instantly. But this did not happen and I had to fire several more shots before the bird finally became still. This experience horrified me and turned me permanently against all forms of hunting.

Another vivid memory I have of this period – it was probably 1942 for we were still living in Milton – was my father's departure on another commission, this time on the cruiser *Birmingham*. He had borrowed one of the large red bicycles (known as "red devils" from the naval barracks and I walked with him to the *White House* pub. After downing a number of pints he emerged and showed me his hands which were roughened and ingrained with lead from his work as a plumber. "I don't want your hands to become like this" he said. "Work hard at school so you can get a good job and look after your mother while I am away". Then he shook my hand, mounted the cycle and pedalled unsteadily towards the barracks. (**Ed**: what good advice and it must have been a seriously upsetting moment for a boy to see his dad go off like that and to wonder if he would ever see him again).

Meanwhile, back in Lymington Mr & Mrs Benn, alarmed by the heavy bombing in nearby Southampton decided, in late 1942, to close up the house and move to the safety of Scotland. John Parrott was moved to another billet in Lymington and I went to Miramar, a large house on the cliff top at Milford-on-Sea which was one of the hostels the school had established. It was run by Mr Hitchins and his wife. We travelled from there every day by bus to Lymington Station and then by train to Brockenhurst. The only thing I can remember about my time at the hostel was that one of the boys made an "apple pie" of my bed but by doubling up my legs I was able to give the impression of not being discomforted. This created considerable puzzlement and disappointment among the others sharing the bedroom!

I was only in the hostel for a few weeks before I rejoined Mr & Mrs Hignett who had moved into Rooke's Bungalow close to Lymington Pier Station where Mrs Hignett had obtained a job as housekeeper to the owners (a couple whose name I forget but who had a daughter who I was instructed to address as "Miss Jennifer") and her husband, as before, as a general handyman and gardener. Presumably they had the bungalow rent free and I doubt if they were under any pressure to take an evacuee but as they had no children of their own and knew by then that I was not unduly troublesome they offered to put up with me again once they had found new accommodation. So I stayed there until I returned to Portsmouth at the end of 1944.

After the rest of the boys had leapt from the train at Lymington I was usually the only passenger apart from Miss Jennifer – who was a pupil at the County School – to continue the brief journey to Lymington Pier. Of necessity I had to make my own amusements although John Parrott sometimes joined me for a day at the weekends. I soon became familiar with the local countryside and foreshore. We listened to the 9 o'clock news every night and then I went to bed. There were two radio programmes that we never missed *The Man in Black* starring Valentine Dyall and the other was ITMA starring Tommy Handley – Became quite adept at imitating many of the characters such as Funf and Colonel Chinstrap and developed this facility for voice impersonations which became useful later when I was teaching.

I did various jobs around the house – collecting firewood, picking up stones from the garden to make it easier to cultivate (how boring!) and boiling food for the birds that were kept (chickens and ducks). I tried my hand at fishing – but with little success; I even fished in a pond with ornamental fish and dangled

worms right in front of their mouths but they never showed the slightest interest – perhaps they were vegetarians.

By the end of 1943 there was an obvious build up of military activity in southern England in preparation for the invasion of Europe and this provided me with many novel and interesting experiences. The Americans were making many large scale daylight raids on Europe and I once counted 60 bombers in a tight formation as they climbed away over the coast. Not far away the Americans had built an airfield for Thunderbolt fighters and I sometimes cycled over to watch the flying. A garbage tip had been bulldozed at the edge of the airfield and I used to scavenge in this; one day I found a large pot filled with lard or pork fat – a real find since all forms of fat were severely rationed. I managed to get it home and Mrs Hignett was delighted and after rendering it down to purify it, it lasted her for months.

During the early months of 1944 preparations increased for the invasion of Europe and by May the area around the pier was declared a prohibited area and passes were issued to residents (a collector's item today). On June 5th the field next to our house was crammed with trestle tables, field kitchens and troops who then embarked at the pier; when we looked out the next morning the field was empty and so was the Solent – the invasion had begun. Every day the lane was filled with big American trucks while they waited to go down to the pier to embark; I used to wander along the lines and talk to the some of the drivers. The Americans were very generous and gave out chocolate and chewing gum and one gave me an orange – the first I had seen for 4 years. One showed me a packet of condoms but I didn't know what they were for! After the troops had gone I used to wander the lane to see what had been left behind and would usually find several packets of K rations (a meal for soldiers in the field) and although the soldiers weren't keen on them we thought they were wonderful and their contents became a regular part of our diet during the summer of 1944. Cigarettes were also plentiful – they were issued free to the troops by the US government – and became almost a second currency and could be sold for two shillings a packet to local civilians. One day a company of troops were lining up prior to embarkation and they began throwing some packets of cigarettes to me – no doubt to make themselves less encumbered on board ship. After I had picked up a half dozen packets or so, a sergeant told me to clear off - so began a period of prosperity such as I had never previously enjoyed.

Not surprisingly, some of the boys at the school were attracted to more warlike items such as weapons and ammunition. The owner of a Brockenhurst home in which one of them was billeted became alarmed and called the police who found a large quantity of ammunition together with a number of rifles and machine guns. I think the boys were arrested and it was said that they had been trading the weapons with some criminal elements in Southampton. Mr Jones had the embarrassment of having to bail the boys out and we were then assembled in the school hall and he administered the miscreants six of the best which he did very vigorously and then expelled the boys from the school.

Meanwhile, back in Portsmouth, our house in Dunbar Road had been destroyed by a mine and my mother rented a flat at 117 Festing Road. On one side of us lived a retired army medical officer whose wife referred to him as "The Major" and she would sometimes shout out over the high garden wall "The Major asks if you children could please make less noise". The first year or two that we were there bombing raids were quite frequent and whenever I was at home we spent a good many nights in the Anderson shelter. During one raid a bomb fell and badly damaged a chemist's shop and several houses. Geoff elderfield and I ransacked the shop for glass jars and anything that might be useful aids to the chemistry experiments we conducted in the shed at the end of the garden (**Ed:** it occurs to me that John had become rather adept at scavenging at this point!). Our experiments also extended to trying to brew beer and making gunpowder!!

We kept rabbits in hutches in the garden and one year, probably 1943, there being nothing else available we roasted one of them for Christmas dinner – although my sister could not bring herself to eat any of the meal since she had become attached to the rabbit as a pet. The following Christmas we were all together again for the first time since the beginning of the war. My father was serving on the cruiser *Birmingham* which had been torpedoed in the Mediterranean and taken to Portsmouth, Virginia, where the crew were given a great time by their American hosts. He returned just before Christmas 1944 loaded with gifts for us. He had also been promoted to Chief Petty Officer; he never went to sea again and spent the rest of his service

career ashore working in the naval base. It was a time to celebrate especially as it seemed the war might very soon be over.

Towards the end of 1944 there was a mounting campaign by parents, supported by many of the staff, for the school to return to Portsmouth now that the threat of bombing had virtually vanished. There were two public meetings in the City demanding that the evacuees return home. A major problem was that the school's building in Victoria Road had been severely damaged during an air raid in 1941. The city Council finally gave way to the pressure and in January 1945 the school re-opened in its home City after more than five years in the New Forest and in 1946 it was re-designated as the Portsmouth Southern Grammar School for Boys.

My evacuation time provided me with a valuable set of formative experiences. I learnt to be independent, to fend for myself and to make my own amusements. I also developed a deep attachment to that part of Hampshire which has always remained with me. When I managed to buy my first car in the 1950s I often used it to re-visit the Forest. The severe rationing of food and the prevailing shortage of just about everything, combined with Mrs Hignett's Scottish frugality and her motto of "Waste not, want not" led to a lifelong concern to make things last and not to discard anything until it was thoroughly worn out – although I have never got to the stage of the man who had a box in his shed marked "Pieces of string too short to be of any use". Another significant factor was my firsthand encounter with the immense power and wealth of the United States which was to play such an important role in the post-war years. I have never forgotten watching a small group of British soldiers in the lane in 1944 huddled in the rain around a spluttering fire of wet twigs trying to fry some sausages. The contrast with the comforts and abundance enjoyed by the Americans was so striking that it prompted doubts about the might of the Empire upon which, we had been taught, the sun never sets.

John Powell 2006 (edited version by Peter Higgins)