

Extract of Ken Priddy's recollections (joined 1941).

In the summer of 1941 I had passed the 11+ exam for the Southern Secondary School but did not want to be evacuated. For some unknown reason at the eleventh hour I changed my mind and stated that I did want to go after all, even if it meant being evacuated (wherever Brockenhurst was!). My mother took me to see the Chief Education Officer (Mr Barnard) who quizzed me as to whether I really wanted to be evacuated and whether I would stay the course. This turned out to be the most important decision of my life – a decision that I have never regretted and, I believe, the very basis of the enhanced lifestyle that I would otherwise never have attained.

So, in September 1941 I joined some other 100 new entrants of the school at Fratton railway station on a sunny day, dressed in more inclement gear, carrying a small attaché case, gas mask, label attached to my buttonhole saying who I was/home address/ next of kin and also a stamped addressed postcard so that later that day (or so) I could let my parents know that I was actually "billeted". I was, that day, only aware of one small boy I had previously seen in the area of Southsea where I had always lived.

Some hours later we de-trained at Brockenhurst. Some boys seemed to be selected to stay in Brockenhurst, some to Lyndhurst but the majority, including me, were sent by train to Lymington where, on arrival, we were marched from the station up the High Street and led into the Lymington Recreation Ground and sat in groups awaiting further instructions/directions. I don't recall having eaten or had a drink since breakfast – we just sat there for what seemed ages; no signs of emotion on that day.

We all watched WRVS officers milling about and these folk gradually took either 1, 2 or 3 groups of pupils away from the gathered assembly – presumably to billet these evacuees upon either willing (or unwilling!!) folk in Lymington or nearby who would look after them for the possible duration of the war; our parents seemed to think this would only last for a few months [or at least that's what they told us !].

As I sat on the ground in the Rec, I saw beyond the boundaries of the ground several very large houses within their own grounds – houses which I had never seen the like before; a far cry from the terraced house that I had been born and bred in and which had been severely damaged during the blitz earlier in the war and more lightly on other occasions. All of a sudden I became aware that my nodding acquaintance, Ken Grimes, and I were the only two of that great assembly who were yet to be selected for a billet. The thought occurred to me that no-one was willing to billet the two Kens (**Ed: must have felt like the last two who had not been selected for a "pick-up" game of soccer!!**). Finally, a WRVS person took us away by car (only the second time I had ever been in a private car!) and drove us to Lyndon House in New Street, Lymington to a Major and Mrs Allot, their Captain son and lovely blonde wife (**Ed: glad to see the hormones were working even at that young age Ken!!**)..

We both sat in the lounge on a very large settee still clutching our possessions. I estimated that the lounge would have easily contained the whole of the floor area of our house back in Southsea! The house employed a main cook and others including a full time gardener. We were allotted a very large twin-bedded room, our own bathroom, sitting room and dining room and also enjoyed the services of an 18-20 year-old blonde Danish au pair. We got on well with her even though we were much younger than she was and the fact that she was waiting to join the WRACS. I wish I had been a lot older but then I was too shy of girls even when I was 21 (**Ed: you seemed to have a penchant for blondes even at that age Ken!!**).

We had to do some 1.5 hours homework every night. We only saw the Major and his wife just before bedtime (**Ed: pity it wasn't the au pair then!!**) when we were questioned/interviewed on what we had achieved that day and what we intended to do the next day (especially when that fell on a Saturday or Sunday). They were quite kind but also quite aloof and looking after 2 evacuees

was just another one of their “duties” after a military career. The house staff treated us kindly and we kept out of trouble and, in particular, helped the gardener.

There was an organised Club for our boys in Lymington but I rarely went since I had very little time in the evenings after homework. Saturday mornings were spent playing soccer or cricket and Sunday mornings were spent at the Baptist Church. One of the boys next door to us was John Powell who was to become a lifelong friend – albeit that he spent over 30 years in Australia (**Ed: sadly he passed away in 2008 – see the former pupils section**).

The day following my arrival I had to walk a mile or so to the railway station to catch the train to Brockenhurst where we all marched to our new school – in fact the building had been condemned in 1939 when the County School moved to new premises (**Ed: see the School Buildings section**). As a result, some lessons had to be taken in the new buildings. We also had to dig the field near the playing fields and plant cabbages and potatoes – all subsequently enjoyed by pupils from both schools. There was little mixing between the pupils from the two schools apart from sports where we had the edge on soccer but they had it on cricket.

(Ed Note: There appears to be a section missing at this point so I have had to piece it together as best I can – the next reference being to when Ken was billeted with a Mrs Bloomfield – it is not apparent why he moved).

I was not happy living with Mrs Bloomfield and she picked on me – especially after my co-billeter, Eric, left. It then became obvious that Mrs Bloomfield was pregnant and the school arranged for me to be billeted elsewhere. When she heard that I wanted to move out Mrs B made her feelings well known – I was moved from my single room to a box room and had to sleep on a low (and uncomfortable) camp bed, with no floor covering in the room. But life was not easy for the Bloomfields – it was apparent that there was not a great deal of money about and caring for an evacuee at 7/6d per week was hardly going to turn their fortunes around either, so I should not be too hard on them.

So, on to my next billet at Meadow Cottage, Milford-on-Sea a transit camp for boys who were between billets. Here I met up with Wilfred Seymour, a boy who I had first met at the age of 5 in my infants school - but with whom I had lost touch when we went to separate primary schools - and who was to become a life-long friend. Indeed, it was he who was to introduce me to my first and only girlfriend, Audrey Buck, who was to become my wife in 1952. After a few weeks Wilf, Frank Aspinall and I were fortunate enough to be allocated to the Miramar Hostel at Milford-on-Sea which was under the control of Arthur Hitchins and his wife Helen. There, “senior boys” (aged 13/14) were in charge of a dormitory sleeping some 6/7 junior boys (aged 11/12). The senior boys had their own dormitories – each of which was named after the view from the window (Needles, Peveril, Everton etc). The hostel was well equipped and organised with a grand piano, full size snooker/billiard table etc. Senior boys took roster turns in the junior common room during homework periods and weekends. Heads of dormitories were also responsible for ensuring that each of the juniors took their weekly baths!

On Sundays, boys either had to attend church or spend two hours gardening. Those who went to church at least equalled the numbers of the local congregation whilst those who did the gardening managed to reclaim the original tennis court – after which Mrs Hitchins managed to find some racquets and tennis balls from the loft [the balls were very hard when found but continual squeezing put that to rights]. This started a lifelong interest in the game for Wilf and me – Wilf becoming a particularly good player.

Next door to Miramar was another large house with a walled garden. One of the smaller boys was caught by Arthur Hitchins having scaled the wall and scumped 20 or so apples. Arthur obtained some cotton and instructed him to climb back over the wall and tie them back on to the tree – with the added instruction that next time he went scumping be sure to take those that are big enough to eat!!

Each weekday entailed a bus journey to Lymington and then train to Brockenhurst. However on Saturdays those playing soccer or cricket had to cycle to Brockenhurst, play and then cycle back – a round trip of some 20 miles up hills and down dales. I recall that one Saturday soon after setting off Wilf's chain snapped and I had to tow him all the way there and back again after the match (**Ed: I'm surprised that the school managed to win any matches at all!!**).

We managed to keep ourselves amused by playing indoor games and walking. Beaches were inaccessible because these had been blocked off by the army. We also played inter-house games against nearby Gorse Meadow and Arnwood Towers – both indoors and outdoors.

Relationships between the boys were good and we soon learned that life was much easier if we obeyed the rules. We were all in the same boat and we all seemed a long way away from our homes and families. There was anxiety lest our folk at home were killed or wounded – not least because so many were serving in the armed forces (especially the navy). Indeed, I recall one young boy whose father was lost at sea when he was aged just 11 years old. Everyone rallied around and was very kind to him and he faced life thereafter very bravely.

As the summer of 1944 gradually came to an end rumours spread that the balance of the war was changing and that we might return to Portsmouth before it was actually finished. But, of course, there was no school to return to (**Ed: see School buildings section**). Eventually we returned and took over the Highland Road building in January 1945. However, this long awaited return (remember we had been told it would be “just for a few months!”) was not all good news because, overall, we had had quite a good life in the New Forest with good friends and living accommodation sometimes far above what we had experienced pre-war. Everything had been provided for us, we had not wanted for the essentials of life, we had had our sport and the teachers had been very kind and had put themselves out for us. Some boys had come from wealthier families than others but there was no trying to keep up with the Joneses and we accepted that if one could not afford something that the others had then we just went without.

From January 1945 we soon adapted to being home with the school running with the same efficiency. In those days we took the Oxford School Certificate Ordinary Levels at age 15 (some at 16) and A levels at 17. Unfortunately I was not good enough to enter the 6th Form although I would have loved to have done so and to go on to University (**Ed: plenty of blondes there, Ken!**) but I did suffer from a mild form of dyslexia (not recognised in those days). It is rather ironic that I passed the Civil Service exam in 1947 and drafted multi-million pound contracts for 43 years! I also had the honour of becoming the first boy to be appointed as a prefect without entering the 6th form. I was also honoured to become the Captain of 1st XI football and Vice-captain of 1st XI cricket.

So, what did the school and evacuation do for me? Well, it gave me a reasonable education, taught me to mix well with other people, share their strong points and understand their weaknesses, and to undertake a well disciplined lifestyle whilst working within a team. It also provided me with the ability to stand on my own two feet (which I was soon to learn was essential during my two years of conscripted military service) and, further, when returning to the Civil Service and being posted away from my birthplace to Bath.

And what did I lose because of the war, evacuation and transfers? Well, I lost touch with close family ties; I never lived at home again with my elder brother as, in 1939, he was evacuated to Salisbury and by the time I returned from Brockenhurst he had been transferred to Bournemouth. In 1948 when I joined the army he returned to Portsmouth and when I returned home in 1949 he married (**Ed: do you think he was trying to tell you something Ken?**).

What I do have is many good friends - most of whom I have known nearly all of my life – many from the old school. John Powell, Martin Cooper, Wilf (and Joyce) Seymour, Frank Aspinall and David Richards included. Although I cannot get to the reunion dinners any longer I often wonder if

it is significant that a goodly percentage of those who do attend are those former pupils who were evacuated to Brockenhurst.

I was pleased to be able to attend the inaugural re-union of the Brockenhurst evacuees in 1990 and to meet up not only with long-lasting friends but also those I had not seen since 1947 – some of whom were still recognisable although others took a little longer to establish! At a subsequent reunion I spoke to a couple of ladies of about my age who were at the (mixed) Brockenhurst County High School during the war. They had not understood (or remembered) that there had been over 500 boys from the Portsmouth school who had been evacuated to Brockenhurst and its surrounds during the war – she asked, in astonishment, whether we had come with our mothers and fathers. There was further astonishment that we had come unaccompanied and were billeted with people we did not know even at the hostels. The War seemed to have completely passed them by and they had probably taken their parents' advice too literally to "keep away from those dreadful evacuees from Portsmouth" – we seemed not to have existed (**Ed: probably good advice from the parents – especially if they happened to be blonde by the sound of it, Ken!!**).

My friends and I often recall our times together at Brockenhurst. We share the opinion that we all got on so well together and continue to do so because we had experienced life and understanding of other folk in a "poor man's Public School" at no real expense to our parents. We are also sure that our experience during evacuation made it a lot easier to accept the life and discipline that was to be forced on us during our National Service periods. The two experiences certainly taught us to stand on our own feet and that, in the main, "we reap what we sow and the world does not owe us a living."

Ken Priddy