

Letter written by Mrs Peggy Durham (nee Gleeson)

The reason why we evacuated to Kemsing in Kent was to escape from the air raids in London, but we had not. We had to endure the battles between Spitfires and German fighters, the noise from the machine guns was horrendous. We picked hops for the Red Cross on a farm and when the dogfights started we all made for the ditches which were covered with twigs, we were terrified.

However, late in 1940 I received a letter from Snowdon Sons & Co., the oil refinery I had worked for from the age of 15 years in 1939, asking me if I would be willing to be evacuated with the office staff. It was considered too risky to stay on the Isle of Dogs. My father said I must go, so in Jan. 1941 I accepted to go, and with a heavy heart I left home at the age of 17 and met up with the whole staff, managers and directors and together we arrived at Broadfield House in Crawley. We had offices on the ground floor and bedrooms upstairs, coming from the East End of London it was wonderland! Our lives changed from then on.

There was an army camp opposite Broadfield on the Tilgate Estate, the troops were under canvas and officers in the big house. There was Polish, who were most polite, Newfoundlanders and Canadians who taught us how to jitterbug and showed us how to do square dancing. We ran whist drives and dances for them in return. We also entertained wounded soldiers from a nearby hospital, they wore hospital blues and were very homesick. Some had terrible wounds, arms in slings, broken hands etc.

In Crawley the Railway Hotel ran dances on weekends, the music was played by Mrs Longley and her all girl accordion band. There was many fights when the drink kicked in, we girls sat quietly and the band played on.

Being classed as a reserved occupation we were not called up into the forces so we were blessed not to be in the firing line. We did fine duty but never had any need, in fact we mostly slept through it. Many of our Canadian friends were in training to go overseas but could not tell us, but by their behaviour we knew. Then of course came the landings in Dieppe and alas lots of them never survived.

Of all the years we lived in Broadfield there were no bad words between us and not one of us had to go to the doctors. We were often hungry maybe that was the answer to good health.

We stayed at Broadfield until the war was over. I found it very hard to settle back living in a council house on the Isle of Dogs.