

## Written by Lydia Spurrier

At the outbreak of war in 1939, I was a day girl at a private convent school, in Chepstow Villas, Notting Hill Gate, about three minutes' walk from my home.

During the previous summer term, my parents had received information about a property the convent had bought in Shropshire in order to transfer the school there. They were also sent information regarding possible evacuation, a list of what should be brought by each child. For the last half of the summer term we kept a suitcase at the back of the class containing the items listed.

I was very excited, aged eleven, especially as my mother had brought a gabardine raincoat, which I had always wanted, nearly to the ground in length! She had previously refused to buy one, but accepted on this occasion! Also a brown strong cardboard gas mask case, to replace the normal issue one. I looked on this as an adventure, + having seen newsreels expected to be bombed, and to lie in a ditch!

However we made the journey in a day, leaving the school in coaches at 6.30 am, on 1<sup>st</sup> of September. I had a label tied to my coat H.48. We stopped several times en route, particularly in what would now be 'lay bys' or in farm yards for picnics and loos, I remember one farm where cheese was fermenting in large tubs, I am still reminded of it when I buy Camembert or Brie etc. As a city child all this was very new to me I had not travelled much, Brighton for the day, by train, or to an aunt and uncle in Nottingham for school holidays.

It must have been a terrible ordeal for our parents, not knowing if and when they would see us again. At the age of eleven I was unaware of the seriousness of the situation. Mother said that all through that day she saw lines of children walking to Notting Hill Gate Underground station, shepherded by their teachers, and then silence, no children playing in the street after school, not a child to be seen anywhere.

It was early evening when we arrived at Acton Burnell, our destination a Georgian mansion and park. The house was barely organised for our reception, and for a couple of nights five of us slept head to toe in a large double bed. The first day we went out into the woods to collect bracken, to stuff pillowcases for our beds. I think this must have been organised fairly quietly with dormitories with beds, and I remember vaguely desks etc arriving and classrooms being arranged. We were taken for walks along the surrounding country lanes in crocodile and on our return from one of the first, obviously 3<sup>rd</sup> September, being told that war had been declared. We must have been quite well protected from the drama of it as I remember it having very little impact on us.

Mother sent me regular food parcels, she managed to fill a large box with 'goodies' – fruit cakes etc – parcel post cannot have been as expensive as it is now! This came about once a month. Living on the corner of Portobello Road all the stallholders knew her and offered extras 'for your little girl' we were never hungry, we only had 'butter' with bread on Sundays. All our mail was opened and anything relevant to the war was blocked out – I occasionally received Picture Post with many items cut out.

Any mail we received the envelopes were opened out and were used for note taking in class – to this day I can't throw away scrap paper, I still use it for shopping lists.

We adopted HMS Ajax and HMS Exeter and wrote to the sailors, sent parcels, and the older girls knitted socks and mittens – we younger ones knitted vests for children – very harsh 'wool' – who they were for I do not know. We also shredded old winceyette pyjamas into tiny squares to make stuffing for pillows.

At the end of the first year my parents could no longer afford to keep me at the school and like a few others I was very homesick – so in September 1940 I returned to London. There were a few schools operating and you had to go to the school nearest your house – there was no choice. The nearest to me was another convent (we were not Catholics and at eleven I was to go to Kensington High School). The convent was on Hammersmith Broadway – there were only about a dozen of us to begin with, I remember playing a lot of table tennis and only having a few basic lessons. However, very quickly more girls arrived and a semblance of normality was achieved. At assembly every day we sang the National Anthems of the occupied countries. The air raid shelter was under the stage in the gym, where in 1944 I sat my metric exams, in very cramped conditions with 'Doodle Bugs' overhead.

If there had been an overnight raid lasting a long time we were allowed to arrive late at school but no one ever did – in the winter with double summer time we left home in the dark. We never knew what we would find when we arrived home from school - once on the bus rounding Kensington High Street the driver shouted 'all on the floor' as a bomb fell close by. One day I arrived home to find the whole road cordoned off – a series of dud bombs had been dropped, including a land mine on my old school, then a warden's post – it was full of sawdust. Another day I arrived home to find the house, which was on a corner, draped in a balloon – it was moored in nearby Ladbrooke Square and had been shot down. There was also an anti aircraft gun emplacement in the square so it was pretty noisy when a raid was on.

At the beginning of the Blitz we slept fully clothed under a sturdy pine kitchen table, mother with a whistle round her neck to enable her to direct rescuers should we be buried. We had the moment of homework and amused ourselves playing monopoly, Lexicon, Belisha and other board games. It was a frightening time, one evening I was sitting on the arm of a chair and was thrown off by the blast from a bomb, a direct hit on a pub round the corner in Portobello Road. Eventually we decided to sleep in our beds and be more comfortable. My Father was in Bristol, working for the Ministry of Supply.

On the night of the Blitz on the City, we first became aware of it because the windows in the houses opposite were bright red, reflecting the fires. We went up onto our flat roof three floors up and the whole sky was lit up. During the whole of the bombing I collected a biscuit tin full of shrapnel which had fallen in our garden, including a bomb stick and shell case.

During this period, before it got dark we would see people trekking to the Underground station, with prams laden with bedding, often topped by a chamber pot. I saw my first doodle bug from our sitting room window, we heard the noise and saw it drop sharply, we thought it was an enemy plane that had

been hit – walking home from school one day we were machine-gunned and had to throw ourselves to the ground. I did see one German plane that had been shot down behind Kensington High Street.

I was never hungry mother made us very filling potato pancakes which were delicious. We had friends in Australia whose sons were in the Merchant Navy, when they were on leave they would stay with us and bring sugar, tinned butter and apples. We also had friends in Canada who occasionally sent cases of red apples.

When I reached the age of sixteen I had to do some 'war work' – I collected National Savings door-to-door in Chepstow Villas and accompanied mother when she was on fire watching duty, about once a week. We had to learn how to cope in a smoke filled room – there was a hut devoted to this purpose on Brook Green in Hammersmith, we had to crawl all round its walls on our hands and knees in order to get out. We also learned to scale small walls, we managed it but some had to find make-do steps.

Our house had had railings all round it and an iron gate, these were removed to make war weapons. Mother said that during the first year there were dumps at the ends of the roads for any saucepans and iron kitchenware – everyone gave what was available.

In 1944 the term before I did metric the school arranged for our year to be evacuated to Oxford – we were billeted with families and did lessons at various venues all over the city – I managed to study mainly in the Public Library. I had to have a bicycle to my joy, my parents had refused to let me have one in London, thinking it too dangerous. I came home most weekends and from the train either side of the railway tracks saw the build up of lorries and tanks and planes, it was obvious an invasion by us was imminent. One evening I was out with my father in Chepstow Villas, looking up at the sky full of planes, a very nursing sight. D Day was upon us.

On Monday 7<sup>th</sup> May 1945 on the radio at 7:00pm it was announced that VE Day would be the next day – we hung out all the flags we could find, many left over from the Jubilee and Coronation. After hearing Churchill's speech on the radio, seven of us piled into a small car, driven by one of our Merchant Navy friends, two on the running board with a large Union Jack, and drove up to the West End – crowds were everywhere singing and dancing, we drove back through the park and had a meal - including Christmas pudding! - to celebrate. Then all seven of us took the 52 bus to Hyde Park Corner, where we joined the crowds marching down to Buckingham Palace. Some of us climbed the Victoria memorial form where we saw the Royal Family and Churchill on the balcony. The cheering was deafening. We then made our way to Piccadilly and Trafalgar Square, hanging onto each other's waists, dancing and singing Knees Up Mother Brown and all the wartime songs, kissing policemen, soldiers, everyone – the atmosphere was indescribable, I shall never forget it. We got back to Notting Hill Underground station, walking up the stairs with the crowd. After a snack at home we joined the party in the Portobello Road where someone had brought out a piano and a huge bonfire was being built, piled up with old chairs and doors, anything available. A line of us joined hands and leapt over the bonfire, and we sang and danced until 3am.

In 1945 when I was seventeen and an art student, a friend asked me a friend asked me to join her at an agricultural camp, run by the Ministry of Agriculture, during our summer break – there was a stall promoting this at Marble Arch, so we went along and signed up for 2 weeks – we ended up staying for six – we enjoyed it so much, we were the only ones staying that length of time and really became part of the set up. We slept in army bell tents, girls on one side of the field and men on the other. We had our own washing facilities under canvas. There was a communal eating and recreation hut. Every morning after breakfast lorries from surrounding towns would arrive and collect groups for pea picking, weeding cabbages, potato picking following a tractor, the hardest job and the most highly paid 10/- a day – there was also work to be had in greenhouses nipping tomato shoots. It was a wonderful experience for two girls who had led comparatively sheltered lives and never earned any money before. There was a great variety of people from many walks of life, students like ourselves, miners having a break from working underground, journalists, musicians, sad soldiers suffering from shell shock, one paraded his imaginary platoon every morning before breakfast.

We made our own entertainment in the evenings, played table tennis, put the world to rights, watched films, visited the village pub and got to know the locals. If the weather was bad we went to Cambridge for the day. I met my future husband during the last two weeks, when it mainly rained. He had been the year before and met a group of like minded people who all agreed to meet again the following year – we played a lot of table tennis and managed to find an elderly lady, who kindly let us listen to a prom in her front room. There were Italian prisoners based nearby and they worked in the fields with us, but vat opposite ends. We did manage to talk to them and for a packet of cigarettes they would make a forage cap out of flour bags.