

Written by Roy Jones

Wartime Memories

In the summer of 1939 I was just completing my second year at Rochester Mathematical School, war with Germany was becoming increasingly inevitable and the Government began making contingency plans to evacuate school children to areas of safety. It was decided that pupils of the Math and Rochester Girls Grammar School wishing to take advantage of the scheme would be evacuated to Canterbury. The evacuation of a significant proportion of pupils took place on 1st September, but I was one of those remaining at home.

When the autumn term was due to begin there was no provision made for those remaining in Medway. The school hall and some classrooms had been requisitioned by the Government to serve as a food office. However within a few weeks arrangements were made for some rooms to be made available for school use and, with the limited staff available, we were able to start part time schooling. Shortly after this, arrangements were extended by our spending three afternoons a week at the Girls Grammar School with the two schools sharing staff.

These arrangements worked quite well until the spring of 1940, when the German advances across Northern Europe made it inevitable that a second evacuation would take place, this time well away from the South East. By now quite a few of those initially evacuated to Canterbury had returned home.

Plans for a second evacuation were announced those remaining in Canterbury were to go to Pontypridd and those in Rochester to Porthcawl.

Sunday 2nd June, 1940 will always remain in my memory; we embarked on the train at Rochester station with hand luggage and a packed lunch, not knowing what lay ahead. It was a hot sunny day and we arrived at Porthcawl, hungry, thirsty and weary, at about 5:00pm. we were taken to a large restaurant adjoining Coney Beach amusement park and given a meal. Porthcawl didn't look so bad after all! We were then given instructions and dispersed into our billets.

Arrangements for schooling were made, we were to attend Porthcawl Central School every afternoon and had lessons in a church hall on two or three mornings a week. The other mornings were spent on the beach in organised swimming parties.

After a few weeks three keen members of the Scouts decided to try to organise some Scouting activities. Initial meetings were held outdoors on the sea front and a number of us, some, like me, with no previous Scouting experience, turned up to see what was going on. After a short while we were given permission to use the local Guide Headquarters on one evening per week for indoor meetings. Other outdoor meetings took place in a local woodland known as the Wilderness. We also started collecting waste paper to help the war effort, we were loaned a builder's hand cart and provided with a small hut for storage.

Other interests included visits to the Grand Pavilion to the weekly concerts. On one occasion we were privileged to see a performance of Macbeth starring Dame Sybil Thorndike and on another the school choir took part in a concert. Several of us also performed, in a play produced by the local dramatic society, as orphans!

By the summer holidays in 1940, few had returned home and the school staff inevitable felt that they had some responsibility in occupying our time. This was accomplished by continuing daily swimming sessions and obtaining use of a very nice cricket ground, owned by a private school, for practice and friendly matches.

During the summer term of 1941 rumours began that plans were in hand to reunite the split parts of both the Math and Grammar School, but were the boys at Pontypridd coming to Porthcawl and the girls at Porthcawl going to Pontypridd or vice versa. Eventually we learnt the worst – we were going to Pontypridd. Most of us returned home for the summer holidays, so it was goodbye to Porthcawl in July and hello to Pontypridd in September.

We soon settled into the new environment. We started attending Pontypridd Grammar School on a full time basis; this school had a very good reputation and a tough Headmaster who didn't always see eye to eye with us. (Unfortunately this school no longer exists). My contemporaries and I were now in our fifth year and contemplating taking school certificate. Early in the autumn term we, in the upper fifth, were joined by 7 girls, 5 from Chatham Grammar School and 2 from Rochester Grammar. This was new but successful experience for all of us.

The Scout Troop was offered the use of St. Catherine's Church Hall for their weekly meetings and recruited additional members as a result of the two parts of the school combining. Outdoor activities now included visits to local mountains, Craig yr Hesg being a favourite. Although we were still running our own activities without an adult leader, we were given more support and encouraged to join (more?) local events than had been the case in Porthcawl. As a result of this several of us attended a Patrol Leaders conference in Cardiff and our Troop won the local annual activities competition held in Ynsangharad Park.

At the end of the summer term 1942, the majority of the school returned home and full time education recommenced at the High Street premises in the autumn term. After a couple of months I left school and started to work but my war time activities with the school didn't quite end there. I with a number of other 16 and 17 year olds, volunteered to carry out fire watching duties at the school and once a month spent Saturday night on the premises, sleeping on camp beds in the Prefect's room.

I would express my appreciation of the school staff during the war whose efforts and dedication made what could have been a traumatic situation into a tolerable experience.

After leaving school in 1942, I worked in the naval store department office in Chatham Dockyard for just over 2 years. In January 1945, I was called up, and joined the Royal Navy. I was training in Skegness when the war in Europe ended. On completion of my training, I was drafted to join the Pacific Fleet. I was on board a troop ship in the Indian Ocean between Colombo and Freemantle when the war with Japan ended. I then spent 3 months in Sydney before spending time in Japan (including visits to Hiroshima and Nagasaki), Hong Kong and Sumatra. I also visited China, Korea, Singapore and Colombo (Ceylon/Sri Lanka).

I returned to the UK in mid 1947, and was demobbed.