

## EVACUATION - FIFTY YEARS AGO

MAY 1940 was a disastrous month - with Europe a shambles under Nazi domination, Britain in imminent danger of invasion, ourselves too near the coast for safety, with no option but to move 'somewhere' but where? Was there now any place available, sizeable and safe, that would house both community and school? Probably not, all the same, our determination to stay together at this crucial time never wavered; we hoped - and not in vain!

An air of mystery, uncertainty and speculation pervaded the house until the official announcement was made: we were to leave New Hall for Newnham Paddox near Rugby, as soon as possible.

An advance party (3 nuns) was dispatched immediately to prepare for our arrival, while here, in convent and school the packing-up began; all set to with a sense of urgency. There was no undue commotion, but normality went into abeyance as the whole household became a hive of unprecedented activity. Good humour everywhere prevailed, plenty of laughter kept us going, while the school trunks filled up and the nuns' effects found their way into the antiquated baggage brought out of storage, to the amusement of the younger members!

Some furniture, ear-marked for immediate removal, was collected; beds 'disappeared' to the discomfort of many who had to sleep on mattresses on the floor.

So we came to the eve of departure - by now the Ambulacrum was stacked high with luggage, packing-cases and goodness knows what! It all looked pretty desolate. Tomorrow the Community with their much depleted school (39 fishes in all, ranging from 8 to 18 years) would be gone.

30 MAY Two coaches were here by mid-morning - one at the school door, the other at the convent, to take us to Newnham Paddox. After a final check, all assigned to the



school bus took their places; with the girls were the 2 nuns in charge, Matron and some members of the school staff. We were nicely settled and ready for off, when a heart-rending cry of "Oh Fricksie" (Matrons' cat!) sent someone hurtling from the bus to rescue the animal, dump it in a waste-paper basket and deposit it among would be friends! (the cat, bitterly resentful, sulked all the way to Rugby and on arrival made off across the fields, returning 4 days later much bedraggled!)

Meanwhile the 'idea' that a few little 'extras' in the way of sweets and chocolate bars from shop - just in case - was welcomed and dealt with. Now we really were ready! As we drove away, looking across at the other coach, where loading up was still in progress, we thought what an uprooting this was for so many of the old. How courageous they were.

We had not been long on the road, when suddenly we were held up by soldiers with pointed bayonets (Whew!). Apprised of our identity and destination, the officer waved us on, his men grinned, the school cheered loudly in patriotic spirit! By arrangement, the two coaches were to stop at St Albans. After

light-hearted greetings and assurances that 'all was well' the travellers continued on their way. We, in the school bus, ate our luncheon rations and enjoyed those 'little extras' taken on board at the last minute!

By early afternoon we had reached the Midlands, on the look-out then for our new home; when, rightly or wrongly, we spotted it, we spent another hour circling round the countryside, trying to find the way in! All sign-posts had of course been removed to foil the enemy, but we persevered - and eventually arrived.

The 'pioneers' were there to direct us to our various quarters, so collecting our bits and pieces and somewhat worse for wear, after our very hot, tiring journey, we crossed the threshold with misgivings - the grandeur of the gates belied the squalor within - but we were evacuees, 'safe' in our wartime home, with much to be thankful for, as time was to prove.

It was not long before squeals of delight were heard - fishes were exploring the grounds, running here and there, to the lake and back, leaping over the frogs on the paths - then the familiar school bell summoned them to tea and countless loaves of bread were devoured - and



so, to unpacking, organisation of sleeping quarters in the one time Drawing Room, Ball Room and adjoining 'mauve room' of the Denbigh's derelict stately home! Finally supper and bed!

Washing (not to mention baths!) was curtailed - the out-moded system just couldn't take the extra pressure. Water was to remain a problem for the duration!

In several of nuns' and staff rooms, the occupants spent a sleepless night contending with fleas!

[NB Exactly 146 years before, 29 May 1794, community and school together were experiencing evacuation from Liege, seeking safety from hostile French armies and at one house en route the nuns had to combat 'quantities of fleas' having rest 'neither day nor night'! (cf. The Migration)]

[On the very day of our leaving New Hall, 30 May 1940, the evacuation of our troops from Dunkirk began - that heroic operation that brought so many to safety against fearful odds.]

31 May '40 We began to sort ourselves out and aim at introducing order into our day.

It was good to hear that some of the staff had made early tracks for the village to procure remedies and preventatives against flea-bites! Able-bodied nuns were hard at it, with brooms, scrubbing-brushes etc vigorously attacking the dirt, the elderly lending a hand wherever they could.

Shortly, we would resume our daily routine. The Denbigh Church, adjoining the house, was a real bonus; and, once cleaned up, it would be in use, and much appreciated. Later, in winter months, the black-out restrictions limited its use, and resulted in an unusual distribution of time to catch the daylight! eg evening and night prayer before lunch; early morning prayer (Matins and Lauds) at 2

o'clock in the afternoon!

Welcome, too, was the assistance given by Percy and King, our "newly acquired men" (from the estate) - they were at everyone's beck and call! (King we left behind, but Percy and his family returned with us to New Hall). In the school it was a matter of allocation of classrooms and return to lessons. Equipment was often at a minimum and rooms often "dual purpose"; so it could be, in the large bathroom, that one of the young was being bathed by Matron while a lesson was in progress! We had to be versatile in those days and not too pernickety!

'School Cert.' was a priority; the candidates had to get down to work; arrangements for the examination here had to be made. Acting on instructions from Cambridge, we contacted the local vicar. He was an amenable gentleman, willing to undertake the required supervision. The only stipulation he made on arrival in the examination room was : all gas-masks were to be removed from the candidates' chairs and deposited by the door! This done and official business complete, he was happy to hand over the practicalities to the nun-co-supervisor while he corrected his own Northern Board scripts. Thanks to his friendly, sympathetic



approach, all went smoothly.

The middle school programme began to take reasonable shape while a flourishing Montessori class developed when small girls and boys joined us, either as boarders or day children, for co-education!

Then there was air-raid contingency - the cellars seemed the obvious place for safety, but had to be abandoned, because of teeming frogs! Our shelters (for what they were worth) were on the ground floor. There were some terrifying nights later, with enemy air-craft overhead, but not without comforts - delicious hot chocolate and a bun (perhaps!) and that wonderful sound of the All Clear to send us off to sleep!

With war time rationing, meals were inevitably a problem; our resourceful nun-cooks, however, soon had everything under control, and even if we did not relish their re-hashes and recurrent 'elderberry' and 'nettle' subtleties, we were indebted to them as well as to an ingenious Proc. for untiring concern, not forgetting occasional treats and picnics at favourite haunts.

In July '40 that eventful Summer Term ended - another term would bring us from Autumn into Winter and thus to new experiences of evacuation in a large, unheated house, compensated though, by great log fires in some of the rooms, thanks to the Noviceship 'wood cutters'.

And so from the rigours of Winter to Spring and another Summer term ..... and, to five more years before our return to New Hall.

With all the ups and downs, uncertainties, anxieties, discomfort and deprivation came all the solidarity, geniality, courage and good humour of those war years,

Newnham Paddox will remain a place of many memories.

S. Margaret Helen

(ED note: May 1990 was the 50th Anniversary of the evacuation to Newnham Paddox but we were unable to cover it in detail in last year's magazine.)