

# At War With The Evacuees

David Gibbs

(Article from *A Miscellany of Merriott Memories*)

*'The evacuees are coming,'* my mother announced one day, and for some reason she seemed rather excited about. It was all to do with the war, apparently.

As a small boy, I wasn't too sure what a war was but whatever it *might* be it was not having much effect on my place in the world. Merriott seemed secure enough in spite of all this grown-up talk of bombs and tanks and *Gerries* and Hitler. But grown-ups were very concerned, especially when somebody called Winston Churchill was talking on Mrs Paull's wireless and the neighbours gathered round to listen and we children hung about outside the cottage door wondering what it was all about.

Slowly though, the war business began to make sense. Basically, it seemed, there was *our side* and *their side*. But now the evacuees were coming. Were they on our side or their side?

Now quite clearly they should have been on our side. They came from London. The German bombs, they were soon telling us, had flattened their homes. They had had miraculous escapes, describing them in great detail. And we country kids naively believed them. What we didn't know is that before they left London there hadn't been any bombing at all. But, be that as it may, when they first arrived, we were under orders to be nice to the evacuees, poor little mites.

I think it was a Saturday when they arrived, seemingly from nowhere. None of this cardboard-gas-mask-box-hanging-round-the-neck stuff or identity labels tied to their lapels in case they got lost. In my childhood memory, first they weren't there and then they were. Our usual friends had to be disregarded. We were to act as minders.

I was detailed to go and call for a boy who was billeted with old Mrs Wills who lived just up the road from where I lived. It was early afternoon. Eventually we joined up with other kids, evacuees and minders, to play in a huge pile of soft sand deposited on the verge alongside Moorlands road and earmarked for sandbag filling.

We played in that strange, inhibited way that children adopt when they first meet and are under grown-ups' orders to like each other. But it was not long before there were squabbles, and we country kids had had enough of evacuees. Cocky little know-alls! They were definitely not on our side.

And in the months that followed, there was trouble at school too. A new playground pecking order had to be established. We village boys had long known who could fight who, and win. This had been sorted out almost from birth, with just the odd playground scrap to confirm or amend the arrangement. Some boys achieved superiority purely on the strength of having a tough older brother, or from coming

from a reputedly tough family. Others were deemed to be cissies by a similar analysis. We all knew exactly where we were, until the evacuees came.

There were fights galore, it seemed; fights before school, at playtime, lunchtime and on the way home. *'Fight! Fight!'* the cry would go up, and we would rush to gather round to occasionally cheer the victor but more often than not to console yet another tear-stained local loser. We country kids were having a pretty rough time of it. Most of us were sliding down the pecking order. We were losing the war.

But it was not all misery in the playground. We loved it, country kids and evacuees alike, when an evacuee called Quinzey shinned up the thirty-foot tall flagpole, right to the top. No village lad had ever done that, nor would have dared. And neither did any other evacuee dare to do so when they knew Freddie Masters, the school headmaster, a little better. Freddie was waiting for Quinzey when he eventually came down. A caning was inevitable.

And the evacuees brought with them an enthusiasm for pavement games that I suspect were much more popular in London than they ever were in Somerset. These games seemed to have periods of popularity that followed an annual cycle. Soon we were all enthusiasts of five-stones, hop-scotch, and another game where we threw a ball to knock stones from a pattern of five rings chalked on the ground, catching the ball as it rebounded off the wall behind. Then there was playing marbles. Or making paper airplanes that littered the playground until Freddie had a purge and put a stop to it. And in the autumn we played conkers.... ah! but wait a minute, that must have been *our* contribution. Like wandering freely across the fields, building 'camps' in hollow hedges, climbing trees, bird nesting and knowing where to catch red-breasters in the mill stream. Or picking pounds and pounds of blackberries for war-time jam making; or gathering pearly white mushrooms kissed by the dew of a mellow September evening; or kicking through the autumn leaves searching for chestnuts felled by the first frost of winter. Passing on the simple pleasures of the countryside, that was our contribution.

It was, of course, a two-way process, and in this two-way process friendships grew. Eventually, my best friends were evacuees. Jimmy Dunn, Freddie Dunn, John Plumb, Henry Plumb, and Tommy, Joe and Sidney Rowe and many more beside, all from far away Downham, Bromley, Kent - wherever that might be, although I presumed it was somewhere near Big Ben. With them, I and other country boys like me shared our formative years, learning from each other, sharing the joys and experiences of a wartime childhood.

Later the American soldiers arrived to occupy newly built huts and hastily erected tents on the village recreation ground. *'Got any gum, chum?'* we asked, rarely to be refused. *'Got any big sisters?'* they asked. *'Yes,'* we'd say, innocently, hoping for an extra packet of gum. And just after D-day, we stood there, big sisters as well, and cheered as they pulled out, heading for the Channel ports and their rendezvous with whatever fate had in store for them.

Later still, when Italian prisoners arrived to occupy the same huts, we hurled childish abuse at them as they arrived back each evening in the buses that had taken them off to a day's labouring in the fields. Strangely enough, in the way that kids do, we made friends with some of the I-ties, as we called them. Security must have

been slack for we spent hours in their huts, slipping into the camp from a gap in the hedge at the far end of the field. One Italian fashioned for each one of us an engraved ring from old brass tubing, probably a bullet case, but I thought it was pure gold at the time. I still have mine; I wonder if Jimmy Dunn still has his?



Grandson Thomas wearing my Italian ring over 60 years after it was made

So, the war moved towards its end. Then, almost as suddenly as they had arrived, the evacuees went home. One morning, a couple of buses pulled up outside the school and the evacuees climbed aboard and were driven away. They just went. Friendships so long nurtured were instantly severed. I remember no good-byes, no sad farewells, and no tears from either side. But I do remember the emptiness they left behind and how, for many months afterwards, I sorely missed my evacuee friends, especially Jimmy Dunn.

### What me? Just William?

The foregoing article caught the eye of an American professor who happened to be researching wartime schooling in the UK and I later exchanged correspondence with him.



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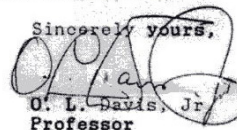
Dear Ms. Jones:

I have just received a copy of the April, 1990, issue of Home and Country which you posted to me. Surface mail continues to be slow, but I was delighted to read the articles about the individuals who were evacuees and those who were "minders". By the way, are you familiar with the Richmal Crompton books for children? Most feature a little boy named William. Miss Crompton's William and the Evacuees, first published in 1940, could have used David Gibbs' reactions as a model for William.

I would like to write to both authors. Will you please send me the home addresses of David Gibbs and Joyce Maynard? When I receive this information, I will write them about their wartime memory of specific school-related matters.

Thanks very much for your kind cooperation.

Sincerely yours,

  
O. L. Davis, Jr.  
Professor