

2. WARTIME SCHOOLDAYS

How different a child's first introduction to school is today from my own experience way back in 1940. I well remember being taken along to Brompton County Primary School by my mother on that first morning (complete with gas mask in its little cardboard box), being registered and then left - abandoned - or so it seemed to me. There was no pre-school visit or preparation of any kind in those days. But still, we survived!

There were approximately thirty children in the Infant Class; some were old hands at the game, being six years old and very bossy with it. The number of pupils was high because of the evacuees from Hartlepool and Sunderland. Some had moved to the area with their families and others were billeted with local families, while their parents remained back in their home towns. We were taught by Miss Thornton who was past retirement age but had been retained because of staffing shortages due to the call-up of younger male teachers.



Shown here in her only Primary school photograph Doreen Forth aged 5

Our class room had a coal fire with a huge fire-guard around it, which proved very useful for warming and drying our woollen gloves on those cold, wartime- winter mornings. Our daily third of a pint of milk was often frozen solid in the glass bottles and these were placed near the fire to thaw out. Our desks were long, wooden seats and tops at which about eight children sat in a continuous row. The windows of the room were high so that once one was in the room all you saw of the outside world was the sky.

I well remember on that first morning, a certain boy (who I won't embarrass by naming), cried the whole of the time, clinging so tightly to the door sneck that the teacher was unable to move him. In the end he wore himself out and fell asleep, still clutching at the sneck. The rest of us were too frightened to speak!

The routine of the day was very regimented and there was no freedom of movement around the room as there is in a primary school today, where children work and share books and equipment together. We just had to stay put and stay silent unless we were asked to answer a question or asked to go out to the teacher to read from the cardboard reading cards. On arrival in the morning, no matter what the weather, the children stayed outside on the playground until the bell summoned us to gather in lines, ready to march

into the hall for morning assembly. Here again, we stood in lines, according to age and sex. while we sung hymns and said our prayers. Does my memory play tricks or was it always either 'All things Bright and Beautiful' or 'There is a Green Hill Far Away' After assembly we marched to our class-rooms for registration and the start of the day's work . There was one girl, one of the evacuees, who was always late - coming into the class-room when we were already embarked on our lessons. One day, the teacher pinned a rabbit's tail to her rear-end in the hope of curing her bad time-keeping. Poor Peggy, it wasn't her fault! No doubt, the teacher would be severely reprimanded today.

We had play-time morning and afternoon - morning play always started with our milk ration. We got a third of a pint of very creamy milk issued free of charge. There was a cardboard top on the bottle with a hole in the middle through which you pushed your drinking straw. Mind you, in the summer, the freshness of the milk left something to be desired (remember fridges were not common-place as they are today). And, as I have already mentioned, in the winter months sometimes it was frozen solid, pushing the top off the bottle.

The Schools Meals Service was introduced about this time. Two shillings a week (ten pence) bought a two-course meal each day for the whole week The food was cooked at the Central Kitchen in Romanby Road, Northallerton. The premises were somewhat prefabricated but it was amazing what good meals were produced. The cooked food was then taken out to the schools in insulated containers. John Winn, who ran one of the local bus services from the village, had the contract for transporting the meals. There was one occasion, however, when the pudding didn't come up to standard. We were served the most appalling, pink blancmange, which I think must have been made with sour milk, it tasted TERRIBLE. Anyhow, Miss Lamb, the Head Teacher, insisted that we eat it up, but a few of us rebelled. We sat there all through the first sitting and then all through the second sitting (nearly everyone stayed for lunch and couldn't be seated all at once). And we were even there into the early part of the afternoon. We weren't giving way nor was Miss Lamb - we had to be taught not to waste food - there was a war on! We were eventually rescued by one of the dinner ladies taking pity on us. She smuggled the offending blancmange away in our white, pottery drinking beakers and told Miss Lamb that we had eaten it.

Miss Lamb, the Head Teacher. She was an extremely tall lady - at least six feet in height with whiskers on her chin - funny the things you remember! She was pretty nifty with the cane or ruler when the occasion demanded, which seemed to be fairly frequent. Both girls and boys were either given the ruler or caned. A cane coming down from that height certainly left its mark, but of course, we dare not tell our parents when we had been punished, we would have only got more when we went home. One wet lunch time, when we had to stay indoors for play-time, I went to the toilets across the yard without asking to leave the room. Upon my return I was caned on both hands for going without permission. I still blush at the indignity of it all, but such was the discipline at that time.

As the country was at war during my years at Brompton School, that in itself created unusual circumstances. For instance, all the windows were criss-crossed with brown, sticky paper to prevent glass fragments flying about, should the building be bombed. Of course, we had to take our gas masks everywhere we went. These were sometimes carried in their original cardboard boxes with string through the sides so that they could be slung over the shoulder. The better off among us had special, waterproof cases. The mobile 'gas-chamber' used to visit periodically and then we had to put on our masks and go into the darkened van, where I presume some gas was released. On coming out, our masks were examined and the people in charge were able to tell if they were functioning properly by looking at the crystals in the base. Fortunately, the masks were never needed in a real gas attack.

On one occasion, the air raid warning siren sounded and we all had to get under our desks for cover. We sang songs while crouching there - not an easy feat! However, it must have been a false alarm as I can't recall any action. A few bombs were dropped in the area on another occasion. South Parade in Northallerton had a direct hit one night and some small bombs were dropped on Brompton Banks. One sunny, Sunday afternoon, a plane crashed in some fields alongside Stokesley Road - almost directly behind the house where I now live. Unfortunately, the pilot was killed.

Christmas parties at this time were pretty spartan affairs. We had to take our own food and even our own cup or mug. One year, instead of a party, we were taken to the Cinema de Luxe in Romanby Road (known locally as the 'flea pit') Northallerton at that time sported three cinemas; the newly opened Lyric at North End, where the New Life Baptist Church now is, the Central Cinema, which stood where the road from the Applegarth car park emerges onto the High Street, and the Cinema de Luxe, at the junction of Alverton Lane and Romanby Road. Anyhow, this particular Saturday morning, the projection equipment broke down (a common occurrence here) and we never did see the film show. So much for our treat.

Progression through school depended on ability as well as age and I found myself in the 'top class' at the age of ten. Mental arithmetic tests were held every Friday morning and where one sat in the class depended on your test results that week. 'How many inches are there in three yards, two feet and ten inches' and 'How much does ten dozen eggs cost at one and eleven halfpenny a dozen' were typical of the questions we were asked. The pupils with the highest marks sat in the back row and those with the lowest sat in the front row, under the direct eye of Miss Lamb. Those of us with a good memory got that we could memorise the questions and the answers, but then, isn't having a good memory what mental arithmetic is all about? Tables and poetry were also learnt by rote and I can still recite, word for word, poems like John Masefield's 'Cargoes', Wordsworth's 'Daffodils' and Keat's 'Ode to Autumn'

Brompton School had two playgrounds or 'yards' as we called them - one for the boys and one for the girls. The toilets were outside, 'across the yard' if one got permission to go, of course! Our playground games seemed to follow the seasons - sliding and snowballing in the winter - we always had snow. Sliding required that you had your leather soled shoes strengthened with segs, flat topped, metal, three pronged nails. Otherwise your shoes quickly wore out. Springtime saw the emergence of whips and tops for the girls and marbles for the boys. In Summer, out came the skipping ropes and the chanted rhymes that went with them - 'Pitch, Patch, Pepper' and 'All in Together Girls' In Autumn, when the days started to get colder, we had to run around more to keep warm, so 'Tigs' became the order of the day. Our P.E. lessons, such as they were, were often taken on the playground. We were always split into four teams, blue, red, green and yellow wearing the appropriate coloured band across the shoulders, and I can remember dumpy, little Miss Bendelow, in her tight tweed skirt, trying to show us how to bend and stretch and jump our feet apart. Not for us the sophisticated equipment of today. We only had hoops and skipping ropes.

Regular visits from the 'Nit-nurse' were also a feature of school life. Local mothers always blamed the evacuees for the infestations of head-lice and Oh, the shame of having your name put down in the nurse's little, black book and then suffering the indignity and pain of the small-tooth comb and the 'Derbac' shampoo.

The culmination of the years spent at Primary School was the dreaded 'Scholarship Examination' or 'Eleven Plus' as it was later known. The scholarship was taken in two parts - the first part at your Primary School, which if you passed, you then went on to take the second part at the Grammar School in Northallerton on a Saturday morning. Success or failure in this examination determined whether you then went on to the Grammar School or

the Allertonshire Secondary Modern School. The standards achieved varied considerably and some of the boys in the top class had even to learn how to write their name in 'joined up writing' before taking the first part of the scholarship.

The school dentist visited the day before I was due to sit the second half of the examination and I had to have five teeth taken out by anaesthetic - not the best of preparations for this important event. As a special concession, Miss Lamb allowed me to go home after I had had my teeth extracted and this was indeed, preferential treatment. You were usually left to recover at school and then go home at the appointed time. We were given three new pencils to take along to the exam and mine were brought to my house after school by two other girls who were also taking the test. They knocked at my door, clutching their own new pencils and handed me mine. I couldn't help noticing that the points on their pencils were much sharper than mine! They had kept the best ones for themselves. Despite such a disadvantage, I gained my scholarship and they failed. Such is justice as seen through the eyes of an eleven year old.

And so my years at Brompton School came to an end and so had the Second World War. We had been very lucky living out in the country as we did, for we didn't experience much of the action and hardship that many others suffered, and I don't recall the war having too much effect on my childhood apart from the loss of one of my brothers in the Anzio Beachhead landings in Italy.

I don't think my mother ever properly got over that sad loss and it is still one of my life's ambitions to visit his grave. Mum wouldn't let us take part in the celebrations when the war ended - such was her grief.



Left: Sgt Stan Forth – Coldstream Guards

Right: Stanley Forth's headstone in the Commonwealth Graves Cemetery at Minterno, Italy



*Left: Here is a picture of my brother Stan & his wife Gladys Forth on their wedding day
Right: Doreen Forth aged 16*

Perhaps we took it all for granted, as being so young when it all started, we couldn't remember much else. We always seemed to have plenty to eat, thanks to the school dinners and the fact that my father worked on the farm and brought home lots of rabbits . He also grew vegetables in the garden behind our house as did most people and potatoes were always plentiful from the farms. The October half term holiday was always called the 'tatie picking week' and quite young children would be employed getting the crops lifted for four or five shillings a day and a bag of potatoes to bring home.

Another crop we all helped to harvest was gathering rose hips. We would fill huge bags of hips from the wild roses on the hedgerows, bring them to school and I think we were paid tuppence a pound for them. And then there was bramble time when we went out picking ripe blackberries for our mothers to turn into bramble and apple jam or lovely bramble and apple dumplings. Perhaps we didn't have all the toys, clothes and equipment that children have today, but we made our own amusement and managed to have a happy childhood.

Doreen Newcombe 1998