

A FAMILY MEMOIR

An Evacuee's Story

From the bombing of London to a Northamptonshire village that took in a little boy and never quite let him go.

BY JOHN THOMPSON

I was born on September 24th, 1932, in Deptford, south-east London. In 1939 war was declared, and the bombing of London soon started, so the government decided to get as many people out of London as soon as possible.

I remember my mother preparing my sister, who was two years older than me, and myself for the journey — gas mask, name tag pinned to coat — and we were taken to the local train station. The platform was full of children and crying parents. To be honest, I really did not know what was happening, but I do remember my mother lecturing my sister that she had to take care of me, and no way were we to be parted.

So off we went, and arrived at Godstone in Surrey, herded into a large hall, lined up, and mostly ladies came in and started to select children that they were willing to take into their care. My mother had given strict instructions that my sister and myself were not to be parted, so by the end of that day we were the only two left.

But fortunately a kind-hearted helper took us home for the night, and the next morning we went back to the hall, and waited for someone to take us in.

Well, a very well-to-do elderly lady came with her companion and took us — not that she wanted us, but because she felt guilty that she was not doing her bit.

Well, she got on to the council, and off we went again (we were a well-behaved and good-mannered lot).

I will skip the next two people that took us in, but the last lady had my sister doing the washing up and the housework, while I was playing in the street, unwashed and uncared for.

Fortunately my mother came to visit, looked at the pair of us, packed our bags, and went back to London.

By this time the bombing had got worse, so bags packed and we went to Aylesbury — unfortunately this was a repeat of our last lodgings in Godstone.

An uncle had been offered a job on the building of an aerodrome at a place called Hinton-in-the-Hedges, so he moved his family down and was lucky — a house called The Cabin was to let. So my story goes on from there.

Gradually the bombing got worse, so more and more of the family wanted to get away, so with the kind help of Brackley council, more and more lodgings were found, and more and more of the family came to Hinton. Luckily for myself and sister, they heard of our plight, and two aunts came to Aylesbury, and took us to join the family.

I always remember getting off the train at Brackley late one evening, and starting that long walk, pitch dark, down Hinton Lane, through a gate and walking across fields to The Cabin, and was met by my gran and members of the family — god knows how many were there, I can count twelve, maybe more — but my sister and I were safe at last, with family to take care of us.

I remembered next morning walking out, and looking at nothing but beautiful green fields, cows grazing — this, after what we had been through, was heaven.

Well, the cabin was bursting at the seams, so more homes had to be found. Farmer Gilbert North had a big house — I think it was called Yew Tree Cottage — well, he was persuaded to take some of us in. The council used to deliver camp beds, so before Farmer North turned around his house was full, but I must say he was a gentleman and took all the disruption in his stride. This began the happiest days of my childhood.

I met the Ayers family that I got to know and love — Mr and Mrs Ayers, their two daughters, then Pincher, and a man that became a second dad to me, Drummer. I hung onto his coat tails, and he taught me so much of country life — showed me how to skin and

gut a rabbit, how to walk around a horse, how a herd of cows had a leader, etc.

Next, unfortunate for me, was school, so it was a walk to Brackley and enrol. I made a lot of good friends from the local lads — they were a bit wary of us at first, but my best friend was a lad called Tony Kean, his father was the trainer at Stein Park. Some evenings Tony would ride his pony over to Hinton and teach me to ride, and some weekends I was invited to stay with him at Stein Park.

“This, after what we had been through, was heaven.”

At first we had to walk to school and back, but after a while there were so many children in the village they sent a bus that went around other places picking up. School dinners were very good, with fresh air and all the exercise we were so fit and healthy.

By this time more and more of the family moved to Hinton, they took over the village school. I remember walking in, and down each side were camp beds. I had a rough count and counted thirty-three family members.

And I look back now and think just how wonderful and caring the local people of Hinton were. I knew most of them — the Dales, the Turveys, the Ayers, the Morleys, the Braithwaites, the Paxtons, Farmer Leslie North, and so many more — and Mrs Arkle, in the big house on the left of the church gate. If any of us kids hurt or fell or cut ourselves it was straight to Mrs Arkle, who would take care of our wounds, and at Christmas she would bake mince pies for all the children — a

wonderful lady.

On Sundays the airmen at Hinton aerodrome were marched to the village for church parade, and us lads used to fall in behind and march to church with them. Sometimes you had a miserable sergeant who would tell us to bugger off, but we ignored him and went to church with the airmen — great fun.

By now I was getting on for eleven, and after milking, Gilbert North would loan me his big walking stick, and instead of the herd going back to the field my job was to take them up Hinton Lane and let them graze on the verges. I remembered what Drummer taught me: find the boss cow, make her go the way that you wanted, the others would follow. I think my wages was a jug of milk, but Mum was pleased. Talking of wages, I used to go to the vicarage Saturday mornings and weed the path, etc — the Rev Seeley would give me sixpence, a glass of milk, and a biscuit. Looking back, I think I was a bit underpaid — oh, and a blessing, so maybe not.

As I am sure you know, labour was in short supply, so in the summer holidays us lads got jobs on the farms. By this time I was used to farming, so Mr G. North always gave me a job. I am not sure, but I think the rate was ninepence an hour, and we would work twelve hours a day, so we were pretty rich, but I gave it to Mum — nothing else to spend it on. Also, once a week a van came to the village selling bottles of lemonade, the locals called it 'spruce' for some reason — we were so excited waiting for that van to arrive. On Saturday mornings, if not working, it was off to Brackley, all into the town hall for a picture

show. I think it cost a couple of pennies, always a cowboy movie, but a serial, so you had to go every week — don't think I ever knew the ending, but I think the cowboys beat the Indians. Then we would gallop back to Hinton, too young to think a war going on.

Then the school gave us a lecture on collecting any metal that we could find — tins, scrap iron, etc — this was to help build an aeroplane, so we all set to the job and soon had a big pile of scrap.

Now it was time for potato picking. Farmer Leslie North asked for our help — my gran was team leader, I think there was four of us from the family. That was hard work. On the Friday we lined up for our wages, and when I got mine he had knocked a few hours off, so I showed my gran, and she took me in with her and asked, 'Why have you not paid him the same money as the rest of us? Started with us and finished with us.' So, after a lot of hassle with gran — she was a war horse, twelve children and ran a business, Mr North wondered what he'd got into — he then paid me my correct money and said to gran, 'Be back Monday morning.' She told him, 'Pick them yourself, we are not working for you.' So we went back and worked for his brother Gilbert. Taught him a lesson.

It was now 1943. The lanes were full of soldiers, tanks, trucks, all the tools of war — Hinton aerodrome in lockdown, planes landing and taking off non-stop, and the ground would shake with formations of Flying Fortresses overhead. Brackley was full of soldiers, and when an American convoy went through, us kids would chase, shouting, 'Any gum, chum?'

— they used to chuck it out for us, to us great fun. We did not realise the horrors many of them would face.

We were very lucky — Mum found, I think it was No. 3 Ducks End, was empty, and we moved in — a lovely garden, with a shed that I filled with rabbits. My grandad then moved down from London, followed by my dad's mum, so once again a house full, then an aunt with two children — but a Mrs Abbott that lived opposite let us have a bedroom, so my sister, myself and two cousins slept there each night. Unfortunately my nan, Mrs Maria Thompson, passed away — she is buried in the local church, I will get back to that later. Grandad was so sick with cancer he went back to a London hospital; my cousins returned. So at least we could all live now at No. 3 Ducks End. The toilet was outside, so being the man of the house, it was my job to dig a hole and empty the toilet bucket — no best job, but someone had to do it. But the veg grew great.

I was getting a big lad now, and Mum bought me my first pair of long trousers, and that Saturday Pincher Ayers took me to Banbury — we walked across the fields to the Banbury road and got a Midland Red bus in; the film was Deanna Durbin, a musical, not as good as the cowboy film in the town hall, but it was an adventure for me. A lot of Italian prisoners of war started to work on the farms — I think Betty Ayers was a land army girl, married one of them after the war, and moved to Italy.

The bombing of London had eased off, so many of the families started to return home. I dreaded the day when we would have to leave.

Woke up early morning to the sound of low-flying aircraft — ran into the back garden, and flight after flight of Dakotas, tree-top level, no doors, and long straps flying in the wind. Then on the wireless, D-Day had started — the Crew Arms that night was packed, all celebrating, maybe the light at the end of the tunnel. Then bad news for the family — Mum's brother was killed at the Battle of Kohima.

Then more bad news — we were told that we had to leave Ducks End, as the property was needed for farm labourers. This was such a sad day, but I suppose it had to happen. But now the job was to find a place to live in London — I will skip that part and get back to the village.

In 1948 I missed the village so much, I rode a bike back to visit, stayed at The Cabin. I keep mentioning The Cabin, I do hope folk know where it is. Or is it still there? But that place held so many memories for me.

Fifteen years ago my father passed away, so we decided to bring his ashes back and put them on his mother's grave — he also loved Hinton, what nicer place to rest in peace.

Then, August '16, as a birthday present, my daughter and husband brought me back — I could have had no nicer gift.

We stayed with a charming couple, David and Emma, at Brook Farm Cottage, and they were so helpful to us.

Next we visited the church, put flowers on the grave, and went into the church — met a charming lady and her son. I mentioned the name Turvey, and lo and behold, she was a relative. The grave was a mess, as expected

after fifteen years, so we cleaned as much as we could to expose the wording — that Gran died as an evacuee during the war. Then it was off to Banbury to buy fresh stone chippings to smarten it up.

Then David introduced us to another charming man, ex-Judge Sam — we had a chat about the village during the war years, and he asked me to write it down for the church, but there were so many memories it would go on and on, so I have done my best.

But I look back, after eighty-four years since I first came to Hinton, and I thank all those village folk for their patience and understanding — to be invaded by hordes of evacuees must have been a nightmare, but they took us in, made us welcome, and we became part of that village.

My elder brother Patrick, I will refer to him as Patsy, was staying with an aunt in London, but the bombing got worse, so he came to join us at Hinton — him and Pincher Ayers became good friends. Along Stein Lane were old, tall trees, and these had to be cut down to allow a clear path for the planes to land at the aerodrome, so one Sunday morning, armed with a big old pram, Patsy and myself were instructed by Mum to go and collect firewood. The tree trunks were left across the grass verge; we started to fill the pram, then a group of horses and riders appeared, galloping and jumping the tree trunks. I ran to the edge, but Patsy just stood still, and the horses just passed each side of him. Then they stopped and came back, and the lead rider had words with him — he was the head trainer. He then called on my mother and asked her could Patsy come to the

stables at Stein Park and work with the horses. This he did, and each Sunday we would look out for him riding a racehorse through the village — I think they stopped to have a drink in the Crew Arms. He got on so well that Mr Kean asked my mother if she would let him go to Newmarket to train as an apprentice jockey — Dad was in the army, and Newmarket could have been on another planet to Mum, so the answer was no. An opportunity lost.

I end this story now, and once again thank this wonderful folk of Hinton-in-the-Hedges for their kindness and understanding — I now live in Kent, and Hinton will always hold such wonderful memories for me.

But still a part of me remains — my grandmother and my father lay at rest in the cemetery — and I would ask one more favour: if you visit the cemetery, and have a spare flower, please lay it on their grave. God bless you all.



John, back in Hinton-in-the-Hedges with his daughter Debra, in August 2026, at the grave where his grandmother and father now rest.