

Memories of a WW2 Evacuee – Gwen Milton (nee Jones)

Gwen lived in London during the war but later lived for a time in Sandhill Lane in Leeds



June 18th 1940

Six o'clock that morning we kissed and hugged our mother and walked to school. We were early. Fifteen minutes to walk and we were told not to be late - so we were early. It was a big adventure we were setting out with rucksacks on our backs and a rolled blanket topping it all. It was important to have our hands free. We knew we would be going on a train. And we had never been on a train before.

'We' were four children – leaving our home and parents for the first time ever. I was 13, Vera was 11, Celia 9 and our little brother was 4. We hadn't walked very far when that little 4 year old said to me the eldest

"Don't look round Gwennie it makes you cry".

I didn't look round; because I knew what a state my mother would be in.

Arriving in the school playground, all thought of leaving home quickly disappeared. There were too many other details to concern us. First of all we were given labels to tie on our clothes, with name, address and school name being ticked off on sheets of paper, referring to columns. With a blanket or without, a cross on the label if you were on the list as a bed wetter, checking that we had a complete change of clothes or not. Checking that had enough food for a day and a half.

All this tied up with the weeks that went before, for weeks my mother had laid out four individual piles of clothes. All ready to pack into rucksacks at a minutes notice. We didn't know when we would be going. One day we would be told "We leave this playground at 7 o'clock tomorrow. And at that stage we were on the verge of the greatest adventure of our lives, going away on our own into the unknown, prepared to sleep in church or village halls, or even school halls.

I don't remember or rather didn't know what London station we left from in fact I can't remember how we got to a mainline station. But it was exciting settling into a carriage with a corridor! A corridor train with no toilet – or so we were told. And it was why we were forbidden to take any liquids in our packs, whether it was true there were no toilets on the train – I never found out. We were dehydrated anyway – it was a very hot day.

The train chugged on – it stopped – it chugged again. It was no good looking out to see where we had stopped because there were no names on stations – no signposts on roads. That was to confuse any German prisoners or surviving German airman, so that they wouldn't know where they were in England. It certainly confused evacuees.

One of the things that sticks in my mind was a huge advertisement 'You are in the strong country'. It was many years later that I knew it to be Hampshire beer! Or was it Wiltshire?

After many hours of stopping and starting and singing ourselves hoarse – by the time we finally stopped we all knew the words of 'Umbrella Man'. Tiverton, Devon was our final stop.

We were then taken to the Art School. I think it as 6 o'clock. A huge canopy type of place, with hundreds of trestle tables and chairs and an army of aproned women and a sprinkling of WVS uniforms, carrying plates piled high with sandwiches – and the best sight of all – jugs of lemonade. And I couldn't stop drinking – seven glasses I counted. I think I only stopped then when it occurred to me some of these ladies would be thinking I was being greedy!

Then we were led out to buses – piled in and my sister Vera said she'd get the next one with her friend Jean. That was fair enough, I had my hands full coping with my very sleepy four year old brother, Royston, and more than 12 hours ago I had promised not to let him out of my sight. I'd see Vera the next day. So I thought. What I didn't know was our bus went seven miles in one direction and Vera's went in the opposite direction.

We arrived at Cullompton, a Devon market town – led into the school – seated at desks. And I thought "this is it, where we spread out our blankets". I don't think I ever thought of the next stage. After the checking in and searching for Vera – I found our

escorting teacher and told her about Vera being on the next bus – then we were told to sit at the desks.

Suddenly people were streaming in, women of all shapes and sizes – young and old. And I couldn't understand any of them. Looking around that classroom I thought we looked a pretty motley crowd, fat, thin, some well-dressed, some poorly dressed, Jews and Christians. Talking of dress I knew I looked all right – mother had made us all new clothes – suitable for travelling. We three girls wore a skirt, blouse and jacket, in case it was hot or cold! And I was one of the eldest.

Everyone seemed to make a bee-line for me, “would you like to come and live with me?” It was like a cattle market. The women stood in the front of the class – and chose. But every time I was approached my answer was the same “Only if my little brother comes with me”. Then they walked on.

By now the classroom was emptying. It was getting late – and two people suddenly appeared and I was hoping the older one wouldn't ask me – the younger one might understand my problem.

Just nobody would have us together. Now I had to appeal to Royston – it was nearly 9 o'clock. Telling him we would have to go to separate homes for the night and I would contact him first thing in the morning. He seemed braver than I was. I was near to tears. Having got him to understand – I felt I could negotiate if I was asked again!

It was with relief when I saw the pretty young one approaching me – to be honest by this time the two late arrivals didn't have much 'choice'! Then the older woman marched up behind her. In that instant I was afraid that I would be in an embarrassing position of having to 'choose'. At the same time another woman approached my little brother – so ugly in my eyes, deformed with an enormous goitre, so old fashioned, so countrified – I couldn't understand a word she said – and with her a girl of about 10. I was frightened. I looked from left to right of me – and there was no escape. But for all that – their concern for us 'poor lil tackers' - their genuine kindness came through - I felt myself relaxing. Like a balloon slowly going down. I was accepting the inevitable perhaps because I was so very tired, only a few days before I had been very ill, with a raging temperature of 103°. The day before we left Mother had called in the Doctor for his opinion – should I go or not. After a thorough examination and his firm 'Yes' my future life was to be re-moulded!

By this time I was feeling a bit light-headed. I wanted to get out of that classroom. It was easier hearing the three women discussing us. They knew each other. Little did I know that everyone in Cullompton knew everybody. I was assured by my adopters that he [my brother] would be in a good home and they would take me to him the next day.

Then we set off in opposite directions. It wasn't a long walk – about ½ mile I suppose. The daughter and I walked carrying my rucksack between us and her Mother proudly walking beside us, speaking and smiling to everyone we passed.

As we approached their house neighbours were at their doors waiting for us, then one of them called out 'nice big one there Miz Rutley'. For days after, I wondered what was expected of a 'nice big one'. What will I be expected to do, I just didn't know. I couldn't do anything. I never had to do anything, except what I had learned from being a good Brownie and then a good Guide, with a sleeve full of badges to carry me through. I'm sure it was that training that steered me through the transition.

So, we entered a cob town cottage. A strange home - full of welcome and kindness. To have an evacuee was a last minute family decision. They offered refuge to a complete stranger – with a united big heart. They had no spare rooms – no spare beds – but they had more than I had that night. A roof, a bed which I was to share with the daughter, but most of all – a very warm welcome.

What a chance those people took. They weren't to know whether I was clean or knew how to behave. They weren't to know whether I came from a good or bad family. They didn't question whether I was C of E, Catholic or Jewish. They took me in out of the goodness of their hearts. They weren't regular Church goers – but they were good Christians.

With hindsight now – 55 years later, I realize now, that was the end of the difference between town and country. Television – communication has completely broken down that barrier. I soon learnt that difference – it was a tremendous gap – but I took to it like a duck to water.

The first thing I was told, the lavatory was up the garden path – two of them for the five houses, one for men, one for women! And when you used the toilet – you picked up a bucket next to the pump – also shared by the five houses and carried it up to the lavatory. There was no running water in the houses. Dish washing was done on the kitchen table in an enamel bowl. They did have a gas cooker and electric light.

Next morning I was supposed to post my post card home with my address. I thought that was entirely unnecessary – I would write an informative letter.

It didn't work out that way. I came down – incidentally washing was done in a bowl in the bedroom. That was my first shock. I started to wash – in cold water knowing nothing about soft and hard water- and this was pure spring Devon water – I simply couldn't get the soap off. I soon learnt to wash with the minimum of water – tip it into the slop bucket – and then use fresh water to rinse with – which meant I was carrying the slop bucket down more often than the natives did!

I'm diverting – instead of sitting down straight away – I was immediately offered breakfast, a boiled egg. How would I like it? I remember saying "Oh medium please". I wasn't used to a cooked breakfast. We were a 'cereal and toast' family. And 'Uncle'

brought it in to me. I can remember it to this day. I've never tasted an egg like it, with the thinnest slices of bread and butter. Perhaps I had never had an egg so fresh and butter straight from a farm.

After that I settled down to my letter. To my horror I could not write. I couldn't see! By midday I gave up and dashed out to the nearest post box to post my formal card. It was in fact four days before I could write without tears. I couldn't understand it. Everyone was so kind. The weather was absolutely beautiful. In a way, I was even happy. Then I realised I was simply homesick. Something I had never experienced before. However before I got that first letter off – a lot had happened.

The very next morning while I was struggling to write my dutiful report home there was a tapping at the door. 'Aunty' and 'Uncle' looked at each other – because I knew later nobody just knocked at their door – they'd tap and walk in. 'Uncle' opened the door and a little boy says "Is my Gwennie here?" We don't know to this day how he found me – he himself can't remember. Somehow he'd walked from one end of the town to the other and found the right house.

He came in – climbed on the chair and his little legs dangled and said "I'm not going back there – I had to sleep with a girl". I didn't know what to do or say. Then 'Aunty' says to 'Uncle' (that's what I was told to call them) "What are we going to do Dad?" Quick as a flash came the answer "Keep the boy of course, keep the boy". There simply was no hesitation, no consultation. And these were people in their 50s. I think he slept in a bed with the sixteen year old son. And a few days later someone said there was an auction of furniture in the High Street, so off we went – I with Aunty. The very first auction I'd ever been to and she bought a single bed for 12/6p. Uncle went to collect it – carrying it home in two trips.

All that happened in less than a week. It was in fact the beginning of a new life for so many evacuees. We never went back to London. The Blitz followed a few months later. Our house was very badly damaged – and my parents bought a house in Kent. They had been planning it for years but the blitz simply pushed their plans ahead – and I have never been back. I have said 'in less than a week' but it might be nearer the point to say the first 24 hours.

The six months to follow – was a new wonderful, exciting and sometimes stressful way of life for me, learning to adapt.

Miraculously if I remember rightly everyone was bedded down for their first night. Nobody slept at all in a rolled blanket on the floor – though we were all prepared to.

We had just two teachers in charge of 'our lot', Mr and Mrs Jeehu. Two wonderfully dedicated teachers, dedicated to teaching children in the East End of London. But I doubt whether they were ever aware that one day they would be allocating their lives to the welfare, the comfort and the emotions of such children away from so many different homes - thrown through no fault of theirs into such strange and even alien circumstances.

Angels, is the only way I can describe them. They were not even dealing with children they had known for years, because prior to the second evacuation we were attending 'emergency' schools. For nearly a year schools in London had been closed, taken over by the Fire Service or Air Raid Precautions Service. There were a minimum of schools operating, so much so that we had been reduced to half days. We had to share the few schools that were open. We went to Malmesbury Road School mornings only. Another group attended in the afternoon.

The children who arrived in Cullompton were 'mornings only'. We never heard where the 'afternoons only' group went to. However on the second morning I joined a number of evacuees walking in front of the house. They were exploring! We walked almost to the next village. Laughing and giggling at our experiences, finding it difficult to understand the dialect. All of us contributed with the odd expressions, as only Londoners do.

"Where's it to?"

"Bid e here a while"

And suddenly I felt embarrassed - we were laughing at and about people who had given us shelter. Perhaps it was because I was older than the others but I never saw them again. No, that wasn't right - in a small market town of course I saw them, but I couldn't remember their names.

After about two days we got word by word of mouth I suppose that we were all to meet at Mr and Mrs Jeehu at the 'Rec' at 9.30. This we did for about a week or so. They were trying very hard to organise us into some routine learning. They read to us - they passed the book round to us to read out loud and we had some kind of mental arithmetic calling out the answers. They showed us maps of Europe and what was happening by then. But one day they produced enough pencils and paper and instructed us to 'write home'. I remember breaking away from the rest and wrote and wrote as I had never done before.

I was over my homesickness. I wrote of lovely countryside- the difficulty of washing but most of that I hadn't been able to contact Vera. After Mr and Mrs Jeehu collected the letters, saying they would post them to our parents. Now I know that they read the letters as 'finding' Vera became priority No.1 with them. It was a week before they'd tracked her down, with her friend in a very remote small farm and soon after Mr and Mrs Jeehu took me out in their little Austin 7 to visit her. What a shock awaited us. Mr and Mrs Jeehu were not invited into the house - I was allowed to see

Vera and Jean, I have a memory of walking into a very dark room with a dirt floor, but it might have been stone, but very dirty. Vera and Jean stood almost to attention - just grinning at me. The woman, with arms akimbo - looked like a witch and very dirty - the man walked through the room and just grunted.

It was a horrible experience – especially recalling that my ideas of farm life came from Enid Blyton’s stories and then onto ‘Girls Own’. On the way back to Cullompton, I silently cried a little – but I think Mr and Mrs Jeehu knew because at the end of the journey, they told me they would get her moved into town as soon as possible. Easier said than done, the next obstacle - Cullompton was closed to evacuee movement. There was an outbreak of Scarlet Fever among the evacuees - so there was so movement.

My other sister was in a safe house - not very homely but safe, with a childless couple and the wife was a semi-cripple. So I wrote to Vera - but she never received my letters. I often wonder what a 13 year old wrote for them not to let her see my letters. I’m sure even at that age I would have been aware and sympathetic to her situation. It was her birthday a month after our arrival. Then the day before - Mr Jeehu came to my billet and said they were collecting Vera and Jean the next day and we were having a little birthday tea at ‘Joe Dyers’ - a sweet shop-cum-café down the road. Vera and Jean, me, Royston and Celia - they had got permission from the authorities as long as we stayed outdoors. It was a wonderful day - as the sun shone every day that summer. Mrs Jeehu sat on a deckchair on the lawn, he sat at the table pulling his pipe and we made the longest daisy chain ever.

Mr and Mrs dyer put on a real old fashioned Devon tea - sandwiches and ‘Chudleys’, that’s Devon scones piled with crusty clotted cream and home-made strawberry jam, finishing off with Joe’s speciality - homemade ice-cream with a great dollop of clotted cream. Over the next few years I was to become very fond of that dear old couple and their little shop.

Eventually about two or three weeks later, a new billet was found for Vera and Jean. It was another load lifted from my mind. However, in the meantime I was fitting in very well with my ‘family’. They were all so kind. They took me to Exeter - so proud of their city. The bus ride was a sheer joy but when they said “There’s Exeter” as we reached the outskirts - I was shocked. I could see all of the city in one glance - from East to West and North to South!

I have only known one city - London. I remember as a seven year old I was always volunteering to take teachers cup to the staff-room - because I had discovered if I stood on a chair I could see St Paul’s from the window. I loved that view. There was St Paul’s majestically standing above everything else - the ‘else’ just went on and on. There was no visible end to the city of London. Often, I have wondered what would

have happened if I'd been caught. A seven year old couldn't possibly account for a passion for a roof top skyline view.

Anyway, unlike London Exeter was so clean – people seemed happier. There were no costermongers out shouting each other, and then when we got back to the bus depot- we knew everyone – people going back to Cullompton after a day in the city! If Londoners travelled by bus they didn't know the people in front or behind them.

The cinema was a big thing in Cullompton. It was little and steep – so everyone could see. At home I'd only been to the cinema as a special treat – to see The Wizard of Oz. But here the programme was changed twice a week – and it was a sign of affluence to see every programme! I was often taken – by Aunty or the daughter. It was particularly exciting walking home in the dark with Bats swooping around, and only a torch to show the way – because everything was blacked out and there were no cars on the road. The only vehicles likely to be on the roads at night would be Army Lorries on manoeuvres.

When Royston moved in with me I remember to start with I insisted he came to my room every morning so that I supervised his washing, but I have a feeling that routine slipped. All sorts of good hygienic habits slipped I fear. Somehow we were still doing the right things by the time Mother and Father made their first visit.

My Father was a wartime fireman and one day he was injured, so I think it was August, before the London Blitz they drove down. And yet again - my foster parents turned up trumps - the whole family did. The son stayed at his married sister's house so that my parents could have his room. They were so welcoming. We were miles apart in so many ways. But it must have been even more difficult for adults in those days. I can only liken it to today's exchange arrangements. Without today's communication TV and travel – we were like foreigners with each other. Only being Londoners we were worse because Londoners were so superior! It was embarrassing! But when people boasted "I went to London once...I wish I lived in London" and so on I thought they were mad. I'd already tried to lose my London accent. Nevertheless – it didn't stop Vera and me wanting to go 'home'. We missed home but not London.

It wasn't long before we noticed an International Stores lorry delivering stock to one of the far flung branches. Tredegar Road, London was clearly painted on the door – our address in London. By this time it was school holidays and we were only meeting Mr and Mrs Jeehu once a week. It occurred to us it would be fun to go home for a day – how we were to get back never entered our heads. We thought it would be fun to give our parents a surprise! One day we walked to the outskirts of the town, sat in the long grass and waited for an International lorry to come by. I don't know what we would have done if such a lorry had come by. We giggled our way through what seemed like hours – imagining what sort of 'welcome' we'd get – and then we got

tired of waiting and gave up the idea of yet another adventure. By the time we got back to the town centre we were still within the same hour.

Casting my mind back – every day was a day of adventure, discovery – we were expecting it to go on – everyday was a very new day indeed.

At the age of seven I had learnt to swim and from then it became the most important thing in my life. I swam for the Brownies and later for the Guides. I belonged to a swimming club. Every morning I waited for the pool to open at 7am before going to school, winter and summer alike. When the threat of evacuation loomed, I remember saying to my Mother “I think I’d die if I couldn’t swim!” She replied in a very off handed manner “You’ll get used to it” and that I couldn’t and wouldn’t believe. So when it came to packing the final rucksack I craftily squeezed my costume and cap in.

It was many days after our arrival I was asking “Where can we swim?” The answer was immediate - I was relieved “There’s a lovely pool to swim in at Head Weir” It still being very warm I was given a towel and directions.

Shock, horror - it was a very beautiful country spot where three small rivers met. Swimming in a river was the last thing I had in mind! But swim I would. First of all it was bitterly cold. And then I stepped in - ugh - mud and weeds! And quickly I stepped out again. There was only one way - to dive into the deepest part, swim and get out with the least stepping on the mud and weeds. So I got a number of volunteers to show me how deep it was - and then I dived in.

The local children were also splashing around - and none of them had ever had swimming lessons. I think I made more than a splash! It didn’t take long to realise the majority weren’t there for water sport - they’d been given a towel and a bar of soap to have a bath.

However, my Mother was right again - I soon got used to not swimming. It was very cold and Devon rivers are very muddy. And there wasn’t room for serious competition practice. So 1940 was the last of certificates and medals. But then many more people were giving up many more dreams than I.

The next surprise – I was expecting to be offered a bath, after swimming in a dirty river. And it was Monday – wash day. And I was laughed at – I didn’t need a bath after going in a river!

It didn’t bother me too much, because I didn’t enjoy bathing in the wash-house with the soapy water left over from the week’s washing. It was like getting into syrup. Devon water, in those days was so soft, the slightest dab of soap and it was almost necessary to scrape the thick lather off.

The washing water was different from the pump water – they collected it from a well in buckets – which meant I spent most of my time in the tin bath gathering dead insects floating on the surface!

Uncle would take me cycling on his daughter's bike - going out to his farming friends to collect eggs, the odd chicken and a little extra real butter. The farmer's wife would take me round the farm yard. I'd be shown the new piglets or watch them milking the cows. I loved every minute of it, especially if we were entertained in the parlour. I hated the musty smell but I loved all the old furniture, the Grandfather clock and the Victorian rocking chairs. I came from a very modern home. My parents I know spurned their Victorian background.

By the time we returned – the dinner was ready and it was my job to go to the dairy with a glass dish to buy a ¼lb of clotted cream. The dairyman, Mr Joyce, or his wife, would weigh the dish and then scoop the golden crusty clotted cream from a big flat tray. I can't remember how long that went on before the Government banned cream. And we have never had real clotted cream since. After the war machines were used. It was no longer a case of one dairyman's cream being better than another.

As children, we had cream. Whatever time of year - if the weather was suitable, our parents took us to the countryside or seaside to picnic, and always our lunch would finish with fresh or stewed fruit and tinned cream!

Another surprise - I saw strawberries growing for the first time in my life and picked them. I, of course knew they grew - but for a city person and particularly a Londoner they came from markets. We never questioned what county they came from. Hampshire of course grew most strawberries. But we never went beyond Essex - black-berrying, Kent or Sussex for the coast.

Before the war – roads were narrow and very twisty. Which reminds me - soon after I arrived at Exeter Road and it was the main road from East to West - I was told (in 1940) that until a few years before it was no more than a dirt road, before it was tarmac. I remember this well because I remembered mentally doing a sum in my head and thinking "that was when the Black-shirts started up against the Jews in London, and I walked to school on broken glass - that was when all Jewish shops had their windows smashed".

People in Devon knew nothing of that. The only communication in those days was the wireless - if you were lucky to have one, and even then it was a luxury that people used sparingly. How different today with TV, telephones and computers.

How would children today manage their sweet ration? I worked out the most economical choice - I would buy a tube of Rowntrees pastels or gums (depending on what was available) to last me a week. But my choice was soon 'recorded' they were always there for me! What it was to be known! I would suck one on the way to school and perhaps one after school. It didn't quite work out two a day.

Another difference I noticed - if one asked a 'local' how far it was to another village, the answer came back in miles. Whereas I was familiar with the Londoners version - ten minutes walk, quarter of an hour on the No 9 or twenty minutes on the tube! All that is a thing of the past now, everyone goes anywhere by car.

Before we were evacuated there was the evacuation of Dunkirk and for several days we of the 'morning classes' got quite blasé about arriving five minutes late because we used to wait at a railway bridge for the troops rescue train to go by. We waved like mad at the soldiers hanging out of the windows - glad they were to be carried through England. I wonder how many men remembered waving to four school girls on their safe arrival home from Dunkirk.

Gwen married Frank Milton, from Cullompton 3 August 1946, six years later. They were married for 64 years, had six children, fourteen grandchildren and six great, great grandchildren.