

**RECOLLECTIONS OF
FARINGDON**
by John Copland



Introduction

During the month of March 2002 my daughter Hazel and I spent a week on and around the Ridgeway, walking the Western part from Wantage to Avebury. A very different countryside to our home county Norfolk. With the Winter almost spent we were looking forward to Spring. We arranged to stay for two nights Bed and Breakfast at 'Down Barn Farm' only a short walk from the Ridgeway. A keen fresh wind blew for most of that week. Hazel remarked on the first morning we started walking "Here we are on windy ridge". It blew away the cobwebs and left us with a school girl complexion. We were very fortunate to have a fine, dry and sunny week.

We found nearly every moment of each day enjoyable with such beautiful rolling green countryside to look upon from our vantage point as we walked. We did not stay on the actual Ridgeway all of the time but deviated on to a circular route or followed a farm track that took our fancy.

We had booked to stay at another farm B&B further on at 'Prebendal Farm', Bishopstone. I think the village can be summed up by likening it to a scene one finds illustrated on a good box of chocolates or biscuits. After breakfast on our first morning there the landlady, knowing we intended to walk to Barbury Castle, offered us a lift as she was going that way. Once at Barbury Castle it was a ten mile walk back. We spent an hour or so wandering about the ancient earthworks of the castle then started our return walk. We stayed on the Ridgeway until we were close to the M4 motorway and spotting Lidington Castle fort decided to detour and have a look. We arrived back at Bishopstone by about 6.45pm somewhat tired and a little footsore, dined in one of the two public houses in the village and that night we slept like the proverbial logs.

The next morning we decided to make an easier day of it by going into Faringdon. It would give me the opportunity to call on an old friend and also to show daughter Hazel Faringdon where I spent some time during the early part of the second world war as an evacuee. We arrived in Faringdon, parked the car and walked up to the Folly. On reaching the tower a formation of private airplanes flew over. Hazel said, "Nice welcome Dad". Next we visited the church and cemetery. At the gates of Faringdon House I said to Hazel that the last time I met Desmond and Mr. Ball senior was some years ago, this was my third visit in 62 years, the two previous visits were brief as I was just passing through. We called in on Desmond and met his wife, daughter and grandchild. We had a lot to talk about, much of the conversation about the past. He showed me two books by Rosemary Church et al. 'The Changing Faces of Faringdon'. After saying our farewells,

we visited the Tourist Information Bureau in the Market Place and purchased both books which I think are excellent. One of the ladies working there asked if I had been to Faringdon before, I told her, "Yes a long time ago as an evacuee". "Why not write an account of your stay for our magazine", she said. So here it is:-

RECOLLECTIONS OF FARINGDON

I was 10 years old and lived at 34, Belmont Road, South Norwood, Surrey with my Father, Aunt, Uncle and younger brother. I watched the great air battles being fought overhead between the Luftwaffe and the brave young men of the R.A.F. The German air armada was driven from our skies in September 1940 but it was a short respite as the enemy changed tactics to night air raids and it was this that made many parents decide to evacuate their children.

Our road had 100 houses, on one of these early raids a bomb destroyed 11 homes and damaged many more it was this that spurred my father to send me away. We drove to Faringdon in his Austin open tourer and I was allowed to sit up front on the bench seat between Dad and Uncle Fred. I was to stay at Station road and the home of Uncle Fred's cousin and his wife, Mr & Mrs Rixon and their son and daughter, they lived opposite the timber yard. Thus began my adventure which lasted about a year.

Mr. Rixon and son George worked on the boiler machinery in the Express Dairy. They always wore clean looking blue overalls. They had a car and occasionally visited their relatives farm, taking me with them which I found very enjoyable. I ate well, breakfast was usually bread, butter or margarine and thinly sliced breakfast sausage, cold meat, pork bath chap, jellied veal and such. Mrs. Rixon served it very nicely each morning, and there was always tea to drink.

I met local children about my own age, we played together in the small park across the road, gradually getting to know the area on various walks we took. The walk to and from the Folly tower being my favourite. I played in the timber mill climbing onto the huge logs in stock which I thought was great fun until I was confronted by a serious Mr. Rixon, a man from the mill had seen me there and reported me, I got a a telling-off but it was put in a very grown up way. I acknowledged the dangers involved with heavy timber and the machines and never went back.

Six weeks later Mr Rixon asked if I would mind going to live at the home of Mr & Mrs Ball, at 3, Station Road, opposite the railway station. George explained that I was a bit too lively and perhaps noisy (surprised me as I thought I was perfect!) for his elderley parents. I agreed to go and George bless his heart, took me to a cycle shop in town and bought me the latest 'Frog' flying model Spitfire as a present, I was over the moon.

Mr & Mrs Ball had a son Desmond, he was 14 and out at work, he was bigger than me so I behaved myself. They also had a valuable, big, blue Persian cat that lived in a run connected to the garden shed. The family were very understanding, kindly people and made me feel at home. My father sent a letter each week enclosing a postal order to pay for my keep and one shilling for pocket money. It wasn't long before Mr. Ball had to have a few words with me over the Holbrooks sauce, on the table most meal times, this was the first time I had used a thin, somewhat watery brown sauce - I shook the bottle to thicken the consistency, Mr. Ball preferred his sauce unshaken, otherwise it was too hot and spicy. My orders were to leave the sauce until others had used it first and when it was my turn I could shake up the spicy residue as much as I liked. Occasionally I forgot but was reminded by the look on Mr. B's face and, "That boy's been at the sauce again!"

A delicacy I remember well was 'The Lardy Cake', it was square in shape, full of dried fruit and peel and I think deep fried. Mrs. Ball gave me one shilling and sixpence on a Friday afternoon after school and sent me to Mr. Hicks shop in Gloucester Street, it wasn't rationed but on a first come first served basis. I wonder if one can still purchase Lardy Cake in Faringdon?

One day I saw a men working on trucks being loaded with sugar beet on the railway, Desmond was shoveling up. I asked him if I could get a job, he laughed and said I was too small. But it gave me the idea to look for a job as an errand boy outside school hours. A boy at school told me there was a job at the bakers in the Market Place. I applied and started early the following Saturday morning, it was only for a week or two until the regular lad returned. The first day I started I walked into the shop, there was one person in at that time, I introduced myself and was sent to the bake house down the alley beside the shop, here I met the baker. It must have been Mr. Sidney Harris, he wore a flat cap on his head and a heavy apron over his clothing, there was a younger man working with him. He opened an oven and took out a tray of hot buns I put on a hessian apron and held two rough pieces to cover my hands when touching hot trays. I was given a quick lesson on glazing the buns. The tray was enormous to me, however I finished (varnishing) them and the baker put them back into the oven. When they were ready I took them into the shop, this was tricky because the tray was very hot indeed and the shop was full of people. There were two big ladies in very nice colourful dresses, their hair was nicely fashioned and they wore necklaces and brooches, but most noticeable was the scent the ladies wore mixed with the smell of freshly baked bread & buns. I wasn't allowed to wallow long, the ladies told me to set the buns down and return to the bake house, I did several trips returning trays as they were emptied and produce placed in the window, then it was time for my local round on a bicycle. There were a variety of loaves and I had to remember who had what. The ladies must have been Mrs. M.E. Carter and her daughters Mrs. Hogan and Mrs. Johnson. It was an experience to be remembered.

There was only one air raid warning I remember, it sounded after dark at about 9pm. I don't recall hearing any anti-aircraft fire. The sound of a single airplane in the darkness and one bomb which swooshed down but made no explosion. The next evening several of us lads took a stroll along Station road up past the timber yard and beyond onto the

farm lands where there was a small earth crater in a swede field to our right at the crossroads. A policeman there said it was not certain if the bomb had gone off in the soft ground or whether it was delayed action, in any case we kept our distance. Around this time, from high ground after dark I could see a bright glow on the horizon and was told it was the City of London on fire and in almost the opposite direction that was the City of Bristol burning, it was easy to notice because the black-out was applied over the whole country at the time. There were always soldiers to be seen in and around Faringdon. Military lorries drove through the main roads and there was a large wooden hut where groups of soldiers would take their meals between Christopher Square and Bromsgrove, sometimes we would have a few words with them on our way back to school in the afternoon.

Twice I recall the R.A.F. bringing damaged aircraft through the town on huge sixty foot trailers. One plane I saw maneuvered along past the Market Place and on up London Street was a Wellington Bomber fuselage and separated wings plus engines tucked each side. It was a slow process because of the telephone posts, shop and public house signs etc. but it was managed by a skilled crew. The other occasion was a German Junkers 88 fuselage and separated wings parked along the top of the Market Place. I had a look at the fuel tanks in the wings noting the thick black rubber outer cover and thick gray cardboard inner part and a damaged area which was something we lads were to marvel at - an amber coloured rubber inner lining, it was a self-sealing rubber which one of the boys demonstrated by cutting, we watched it seal and grow together again, clever. If a bullet or shell splinter entered the tank there would be a good chance of saving a fuel leak.

I got another job, this time for a butcher, I cannot remember his name but his shop was situated on a site where the police station and telephone exchange now stand. He was a young man not long married, his wife ran 'Jane's Pantry' in the Market Place. I enjoyed working there on Saturdays, my employer was a very pleasant man and I had a good trade bicycle to make deliveries on. Thinking of bicycles, on one occasion Mr. Ball and Desmond borrowed a bike for me, a fishing rod and tackle and took me fishing in the Thames. We had a bright fresh day, the journey didn't seem very long and we settled on the steep sides of a field. I remember a small thatched cottage directly opposite across the river. Then came an added attraction, I was the first to hear a faint whisper of a high speed engine and as I turned to look up the big field directly behind us, pointing directly at us, coming at a terrific speed was a Spitfire fighter, it took us all by surprise. We jumped off the bank into the clay on the edge of the river, the airplane was perhaps 10 feet above the ground. It pulled up into a climbing turn to the left and rolled off into the distance, one could almost imagine the pilot having a good grin at us and probably thinking, "This'll wake 'em up a bit".

Desmond changed his job and went off extremely early each morning on his bicycle to help build a new airfield and runways etc.. On one occasion he came home to tea after dark, the door to the kitchen burst open and he jokingly made a grab at his mother to hug her. At first it was all noise and laughter but Mrs Ball suddenly pulled back with a look

of fear on her face, Mr Ball jumped up from his chair and together they pulled off Desmond's thick jacket, "You're on fire boy" was the cry and the smoldering jacket was put into the garden. It seems that Desmond finished work on the airfield and lit up a cigarette before cycling homeward, an ember had blown onto his jacket's shoulder stitching and was fanned as he cycled into the wind, by the time he got home the lining was glowing red hot. Fortunately he didn't get burned.

Mr & Mrs Ball had two daughters. Iris used to call in on her parents each week. Kathleen lived outside Faringdon on the Wantage Road, we all went to visit several times. I liked this as we usually had tea there and Mr Wiltshire had an air rifle for shooting rabbits and wood pigeons. He never let me to use the gun, I was told pellets were difficult to get. I accepted this and now think it was probably very wise, I'll bet the rabbits were pleased as well! On one such visit Kathleen had given birth to a baby boy, everyone took turns holding the new arrival and to my surprise I was allowed to. Someone took the photograph attached, a copy of the only photo I had taken during the war. The child is the eldest son of Mr and Mrs Wiltshire and who knows? I may yet meet the gentleman I held in my arms as a baby all those years ago, God bless him.

The day prior to Christmas Eve 1941 my father and his sister, my Aunt Doris arrived at the railway station I greeted them with great excitement wanting to know of news of South Norwood. I was dismayed to learn they were only staying over night with me, however it was good to see them. When they departed on the morning train to London it felt terrible not to be returning with them and I waved goodbye from the platform. Unable to explain the empty feeling I was experiencing for the first time in my life I just walked off, I should have started work at the butchers, it was Christmas Eve and even knowing there would be a busy day ahead I didn't go. Some time later I met the butcher in town, he was very pleasant in conversation, better than I felt I deserved, he told me he had to get another lad to help him that day and the lad did well for Christmas tips. I'd like to think we parted friends. I knew should have carried out my commitments and apologized for letting him down.

On Boxing Day in the Market Place I witnessed a gathering of horsemen outside the Bell Hotel, ladies and gentlemen in splendid hunting pink. They were being served a stirrup cup by the waiters from the hotel. It was the first time I had seen anything like this, it was very colourful. Next came a rider leading a number of hounds past the church, he blew on a small bugle. Soon the rest of the mounted company were following. I thought it was a wonderful sight.

I used to call on a particular chum of mine Billy Isard, his younger brother was also in the class, both evacuated from London and billeted on the farm of Mr & Mrs Isles'. We would walk around the field opposite the farm house, into which about 100 yards or so the ground fell away very steeply and there was a wonderful view of the surrounding countryside to be enjoyed. An old truck had been dumped down to the left where it rested near a small hawthorn wood we often played on it. After a good fall of snow we used to ride downhill on an odd collection of vehicles that served as toboggans, I think it was

called the 'Point to Point'. I remember riding down to the bottom encountering a drop at the edge of between 6 and 10 feet into an adjoining field and landing in a huge snowdrift. There was a field just beyond the saw mills on Station road which had a depression that was usually flooded and in winter sometimes froze. I saw people skating on several occasions and I wondered, "How does one obtain ice skates?" having never seen them in local shops!

A rather outstanding memory was walking up Folly Hill with Billy, nearing the tower we heard a siren-like shriek which came from a Mark I Blenheim bomber flying low over Faringdon. It circled the tower making a terrific scream we thought maybe it was a new weapon in answer to the German Stuka dive bomber's screamer. The strange thing was we found no one else who saw the Blenheim let alone heard it!

I regularly visited a church hall in Marlborough Street, it was near the old Post Office. The vicar used to charge 6d each for a film show from his projector. The only film I remember watching was 'Brown On Resolution'. These viewings were always well attended.

I once had thoughts of walking back home to South Norwood having heard a story of other evacuees returning under their own steam. To be honest I had no idea of how to go about it and maps weren't easy to come by. Seriously thinking I found that main road signs were non-existent having been taken away because of the war, what if I walked in the wrong direction? My navigation was useless and after all it was only an idea - I gave it up and felt much better.

I went to The British School in Lechlade Road. A large class on account of the evacuees. Mr Tidyman the headmaster seemed very strict. I was once caught talking and sent to the headmasters office for a whack of the cane on the hand. I recall two boys waiting by the office, one a curly haired lad, the other a big lad for his age, a refugee of the Spanish revolution, his name phonetically was Conito Urekay, he put up a big argument about the caning. Other children I recall were a tall lad from London, his surname was Upton; Rachael Boffin a prefect, her father was the local butcher. In 1941 I and 5 other boys had to sit an exam at King Alfred's school, Wantage catching the bus from Market Square in the morning and finishing after midday. We left the school, the tallest lad in our party had been told by a local that the bus for Faringdon had gone at 12pm. He became our leader and said we would have to walk, no hesitation we all agreed and started the long walk home. Luckily after a short time a car drew up, a rattle-handled Austin - a small motor with a fixed starting handle in front. The driver wore a suit and black cap with shiny peak, he offered us a lift to Faringdon. We did our best to seat ourselves on several large sacks of army boots he was delivering to Shrivenham, it was rather like a good kicking but very kind of him to pick us up and deliver us none the worse for it. I don't know how the other lads did with the exams, I certainly didn't do well.

Father made arrangements for me to get a lift on an Express Dairy milk tanker to London where he would meet me. I waved goodbye to the folks that had looked after me so well

and for so long and looked forward to the long ride home. My father met me at Cricklewood, greeted me and explained that things were much quieter regarding air raids, so he decided to have me home. He noticed as we strolled that I had developed the long stride of a countryman, I hadn't realized but felt pleased I had a legacy from my stay at Faringdon. The first night back home there was an air raid, several bombs were dropped, one in between the goal post in the local park (full marks to the German bomb aimer), two houses had direct hits, the railway plus two in the woods.

That concludes my story as an evacuee in Faringdon from 1940 to 1941. I hadn't realized just how difficult it would be to recall what happened sixty three years ago. It has proved an interesting exercise and made me realize that as a child I lived from day to day without thinking of time itself. To sum up I wish to say that I found Faringdon a lovely town full of good people.