

Memories of wartime Stondon

I was five when my family left London at the start of the war in 1939. We had relations who owned the two pairs of thatched cottages in Stondon, one of which you show on your web site.

Mrs Jackson who owned them lived in the right hand one with Nathan Jackson, and Will Jackson, Nathans son who was a special constable at RAF Henlow lived in the one on the left. They each had two bedrooms and you had to go through one bedroom to get to the other, all had an outside toilet that had to be emptied pretty regularly.

We lived in one of the other cottages on the same piece of land, and at one time there were fourteen of our relations staying in one cottage, so it was rather crowded. There was just one small Anderson shelter in the garden, and I remember going in it a few times.

After a few weeks my parents were offered a place at Stondon rectory opposite the church, it was a part of the rectory that had not been used for some time so it took my mother and aunt several days to make it habitable.

We spent all the war years there with the rev cannon Sherral and his wife. They were quite elderly at the time but were very good to us. And one of my cousins was born in the rectory while we were there

I went to the village school, and in those days it only had two classrooms, the largest at the front was split in two with a large green curtain between, there were only two teachers one being the headmistress a Miss Forster (not sure of the spelling) I know she lived in Station road on the left going towards the camp. And I know she had a big stick by her desk with a knob on the end of it that kept us in order. The other teacher was a Miss Jones who lived in Meppershall, and would cycle to school every day.

The headmistress would often be taking two classes at once one on each side of the curtain.

Miss Jones had the classroom at the back, and I well remember having regular practice in there, at putting our gas masks on just in case they were required.

We would go into the village hall every morning for our hot milk.

After school on a rota system a few of us would have to collect waste paper from the local people, and this was stored in a shed in the playground until taken away. Also in the Summer we were expected at weekends to collect a jam jar full of haws, to be sent away to make rose hip syrup.

I had my first tooth extraction in a mobile caravan that used to go around the villages, this was parked behind the village hall, no injections then just gas.

As a family we would sometimes go to the pictures at the camp cinema, and would have to walk back in the blackout to the rectory.

My mother would do a lot of her shopping at the N.A.F.F.I stores which was situated just past the railway station at the camp.

My mother was also in the WVS were they used to put on teas for the airmen at weekends in the village hall. Mrs Pollard was in charge of the WVS, she and her husband ran the Holwellbury fruit farm, were we would often go for tea.

I became a member of the cubs (The 108th air contact group) we used to meet at the village hall, and it was run by one of the girls from the woman's royal air force from Henlow.

The rectory had no electricity and just two gas mantles, which were in our part of the house, the rest being lit by oil lamps, the bedrooms were very cold in the winter.

The front hall had a lot of stuffed birds and animals in glass cases.

The only radio we had was a one valve set which my father had made, it had to have a

large dry battery plus an accumulator made of glass, that had to be taken down to the camp to be charged. My brother dropped and broke it on the Birch bus bringing it back so the acid was spilt, so after that Birch bros put up a notice banning the carrying of accumulators on their buses.

We would go to church on Sunday evenings, and my brother would pump the organ for the organist Miss Jones the teacher, quite often the weight at the back of the organ would drop off, and the vicar would stop the service while my father got behind to put it on again, so that Miss Jones could continue playing.

I remember seeing a V1 rocket with flames out of the back of it come across Stondon suddenly stop, but as luck would have it, it glided on and I seem to remember it split a tree in two near Campton. You could see the sky some nights being a red glow when you looked in the direction of London, if it was being bombed.

My best friend at the time was the late John Parrish of Manor Farm, and most of our time was spent around the farm, getting up to all sorts of things. There was a sand pit on the farm where the home guard used to have weapons practice, and as boys we would dig into the sand to find bullets, and spent shells. We had a raft on the pond near the church made of old railway sleepers, and John's mother was the billeting officer for Stondon during the war.

Three Italian prisoners' came to work on the farm, I remember going on the back of a lorry to pick them up from Chicksands, and they lived on their own in Rectory farm for the time they were here, and as boys we would often go and get a slice of bread and jam from them. With the life they had away from the war, I do not think escaping would have been an option for them, we all got on very well with them. I remember their names to this day. (Resato, Terrachotie, and Scarpie)

The American soldiers came to Stondon for a short while, they were training before being sent abroad. One of their temporary base camps was a large trench by the side of the road , just about where the water tower was later built, telephone cables ran all along the hedgerows and across some fields. My mother and aunt would often take hot jugs of cocoa out to them if it was a cold night.

My father worked for the London electricity board, and would cycle to Hitchin to catch the early morning train. Some nights he would have to stay in London to do Fire watching, and later in the war he went with my Uncle who had a 1927 Austin seven. At the weekends he would take me on the crossbar of his cycle with a small cart on the back made from a tea chest to Meppershall to get vegetables from a Mr Cakebread who had a small nursery, I seem to remember he only had one arm.

There were some tennis courts opposite the thatched cottages, but I do not think they got used very much.

So I have some very happy childhood memories of Stondon, and when after the war we returned to London, I still spent my Summer school holiday's back at Stondon to help out at harvest time at Manor farm until 1953 when I was called for national service.

Roy Bennett