

The War Years 1939-1945

When I heard Winston Churchill announce on the radio that we were at war with Germany, I was in Newcastle at a boy's who we had met on holiday. His name was Willy Nairn. I remember, vaguely, catching the train home and wondering whether we would soon be getting bombed! It was September - two months before my 11th birthday.

During the war years I was at Balshaws Grammar School. We had underground air-raid shelters in part of the playing fields and periodically practiced leaving the school to go into them in case of a raid. We never had cause to use them as the few alerts that occurred happened at night.

The Government encouraged everyone to grow their own vegetables etc because the German Navy was preventing food from overseas reaching us. It was called 'Digging for Victory' and many women joined the Women's Land Army to work on farms and so increase the volume of home produced food.

During the summer holidays our school ran a 'School Farm Camp' when we were asked to spend one to four weeks working on farms at Winmarleigh (between Garstang and Pilling). I went every year for the full four weeks, getting there on a bike which I had built from spare parts! We slept in bell-tents, about eight lads to a tent, and meals were served by the teachers in a large marquee.

During the day we were allocated jobs on the farms. One day I was given a scythe and spent the day 'bobbing' thistles (they had to be cut down before they seeded to prevent them spreading). Another day I spent following a 'Spinner'(?), pulled by a tractor, which dug out potatoes at a running speed. Our job was to follow behind and pick up the potatoes and throw the reasonably sized ones into a large hamper and the small ones (chats) into another - backbreaking!!

Another job entailed crawling along rows of sugar beet pulling out weeds; the thistles and nettles didn't improve the state of your hands or bare knees!

I also spent a day or two 'ditching'. This consisted of pulling green slime out of the irrigation ditches surrounding the fields, using a six-pronged fork which was bent at right-angles at the end.

When it was too wet to work outside we worked in the barn sawing 'bog oak' (tree trunks which had, over centuries, been buried and become coal). We set up a table tennis table in the barn for after work recreation.

One night while climbing a tree overlooking a pond, to get a fork for a catapult, the branch broke and I fell in. The write-up in the school magazine about the farm camp read "One of the highlights was the night of 'Ducky' rising from the pond like the Lady of Shalott covered in evil smelling green slime." They had to hose me down before anyone would come near me but the farmer's wife took pity on me and let me have a bath in the farmhouse.

At school I'm afraid I didn't take lessons very seriously, English and History were my best subjects. Maths was 'alright' especially geometry, and some Physics was interesting! It was only after swotting my way to four credits and three passes, and only one fail (Latin), at O.S.C, I realised how much better I could have done if I had worked harder earlier! I played full-back at rugby and enjoyed games a lot more than lessons!

THE SCHOOL FARM CAMP.

August 9th—23rd, 1941.

We again held this camp at Winmarleigh on Mr. J. Helme's farm, not far from last year's camp site.

We were very fortunate in our choice of site, which was dry and sheltered, commanding a fine view of the surrounding country. We were even more fortunate in the hospitality and help which we received from Mr. & Mrs. Helme.

The weather was less kind, for after allowing us to pitch our tents dry, it rained almost every day. However, surprisingly little time was lost, the boys getting in 800 working hours. As a result of the good impression made last year, Mr. Oldland found the farmers very willing to give us employment, all the boys getting work for the whole fortnight. Once again they worked well and justified the good opinion won last year.

When not pulling potatoes or harvesting, the boys got down to the really serious and strenuous job of eating. The food was very good and plentiful. Despite the difficulties of rationing, of cooking meals on camp fires and primus stoves, and of serving meals in the rain, Miss Whitehouse and Miss Whewell never failed us.

Mr. Oldland, after some unnecessary demonstrations by the female members of the party, ably took charge of the washing-up and also provided wood for the fire—two jobs which were no sooner done than they had to be begun again.

We were also pleased to have Mr. Fisher with us to give us the benefit of his experience in the organisation of camp life.

On several days visitors descended on us as from another world. They brought with them an air of fastidious refinement and although they seemed to view our primitive mode of living with polite amusement, we were nevertheless very glad to see them.

Of course we had other occupations besides working, eating and sleeping. One remembers table tennis on a sloping board in the big barn, the smell of hay, the rapid clack of the ball and the groups of sleeping kittens scattered on the floor.

Rabbits provided another diversion. Hope and Tennant stalked them with an air gun; Tittley snared them; Mr. Fisher dissected them; aspiring cooks stewed them; some of us ate them.

We remember too Eckton's attempts to catch fish and the water bailiff's attempt to catch Eckton—the score was two all.

There were many outings: a swimming party cycled to Rossall; another climbed the fells; while several equally entertaining expeditions did not receive official recognition.



THE SCHOOL FARM CAMP AT WINMARLEIGH — AUGUST, 1941.

- 1.—Some of the party.
- 2.—Mr. Bennison, Mr. Oldland and Sefron, study the map.
- 3.—Miss Whitehouse and Miss Whewell, whose excellent catering was a feature of the camp.
- 4.—A farewell gathering.