

Evacuation of Children from Birmingham to Coalville, Leics. Sept 1939

By

People in story: Gladys Irene Dark (Now Gladys Irene Jones)

Location of story: Birmingham/Coalville, Leics

Background to story: Civilian

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Evacuation from Birmingham to Coalville in Leicestershire on 1st September 1939 began with a slight hiccup for me. I was 10 years old. That morning my mother had taken me to St Agnes Church of England Junior School on Stratford Road, Sparkbrook, Birmingham. A large, red brick collection of buildings standing beside a church with a huge rectangular tower. I hadn't been to this school before. Prior to September 1939 I had attended Dennis Road Junior School which was about a mile away, but in August we had moved house and my mother had arranged for me to start at St Agnes School at the beginning of the autumn term. This was nearer to our new home.

During the early part of 1939 parents were notified that in the event of War plans to evacuate children from inner City Schools would be put in place. If they wished their child to be evacuated they were asked to sign an appropriate form. My mother had agreed ~~to~~ that I should be registered for evacuation if this ^{became} necessary. Rehearsals were held so that children would be aware of what is likely to happen. We had been told that at the start of the new term in September that children should take along their gas mask, which already had been issued to everyone, And a change of clothes, as there was to be another evacuation rehearsal. On arrival we could see through the school railings, the children being lined up in the playground. Mother said something like, "Go on quick – get on the end of that line." So I did. Before I could wave goodbye I was hurried towards the waiting buses. There was no time to check whether I was still registered with that school. With great excitement we boarded the buses and were soon leaving the busy urban streets of Birmingham and heading for the country. What fun! It was like a day trip on a Bank holiday.

Eventually we arrived in the little town of Coalville, Leicestershire. Alighting from the buses we were marched into a large hall. Here we were told to line up in alphabetical order. "As" in one line "Bs" in the next, and so on. My surname was Dark so I joined the lines of "Ds." Around the sides of the of the Hall people stood in

groups, mostly ladies I recall, and as the person in charge called each child's name they were handed to one of the waiting people. No choices were made: they took whoever they were given and the child went to that person. One by one the children were taken and I realised that I was the only child left. "Oh we seem to have one left over," said the lady in charge. Looking at me through her horn rimmed glasses, she said "what's your name?" Looking up I replied "Gladys Irene Dark." She looked at the list she was holding and said that I wasn't on the list. Leaving me standing alone in the middle of the Hall she walked to the side and approached a lady standing rather anxiously holding the hand of another small girl who had previously been handed to her. "Could you take another one?" She asked. "No thank you" said this lady "I only put my name down for one."

The tall lady with the horn rimmed glasses looked at me again and then frowned, and then said "could you perhaps take her for tonight and we will find someone else to have her tomorrow." All right said the lady, rather reluctantly. "Come Along", said the tall lady beckoning to me. I picked up my brown paper parcel with the change of clothes in and hitched my gas mask more firmly onto my shoulder and walked towards the waiting lady who took my spare hand as she, the other small girl and I walked from the Hall.

Despite being the odd one left over in the middle of the Hall I was very lucky as the lady who rather reluctantly took me was a very kindly motherly person called Mrs Greasley. No approach was made by anyone the following day as far as I was aware and she must have decided to keep me because I remained with her for the next 12 months. Perhaps she felt sorry for me. I was rather like "Little Orphan Annie" being a thin weedy child with bright hair and freckles: as far removed from the Shirley Temple film star image as could be imagined. The first little girl that Mrs Greasley had been given was a blue-eyed little blonde but she was very homesick and her mother came and took her back to Birmingham after a few days.

That first day of the evacuation of children from Birmingham might seem very traumatic for a small 10 year old child but I was not leaving a cosy home where mother and father provided for their family and protected them from problems. My parents had separated when I was a baby and home life had been difficult. I was the youngest of a family of five. My brother and 3 sisters had started jobs by the time I began school and my brother and eldest sister had already left home. My mother was in her early fifties and she would now be described as a single mother. No such term had been invented in the 1930s and there were no state benefits. To help support us. There were very few jobs for elderly married women then especially if they had little education or qualifications. Mother managed to scrap a living by cleaning other people's homes. She had very poor health. Which at the time was generally described as "bad nerves." As a result of our situation we had always found it difficult to keep a roof over our heads. As landlords did not look kindly on a single mother with hardly any income and no husband for support. Prior to the war our home had always been either with kind relatives or a couple of rooms in someone else's house.

As a result of the evacuation and of being handed over to the kind Mrs Greasley I joined a family with a home of their own where there was a husband and an elder daughter who both went out to work whilst Mrs Greasley stayed home and looked after the house. They were not a well to do family. But the home was well cared for

and comfortable. Mr Greasley was a miner, He left the house early in the morning and returned in the afternoon covered in coal dust and in his working clothes. How different this was to my previous home life. At midday I went home from school to a cooked dinner and what a joy that was. I could smell what was cooking as I entered the back door into the kitchen. I couldn't get in quick enough especially on Wednesday when we had steak and kidney rolled in suet pastry. As I entered the kitchen, the mouth watering aroma would greet me as Mrs Greasley unrolled the cloth in which this wonderful concoction had been boiled. When I returned home from school in the afternoon, the kitchen was 'out of bounds' as Mr Greasley would be having his bath in there, so I went through the front door into the parlour where a plate of neat jam sandwiches and a slice of homemade cake and a glass of milk would be laid ready for me.

Being transported to Coalville and this trouble free life where I could go off to school each day without any worries about my mother and my unsettled home life was like a fairy tale come true and for the first time in my life I could enjoy school and learning became a new and challenging experience. I soon put on weight and was no longer the thin weedy child I had been although I still had the bright red hair and the dreaded freckles. As I was 11 during the time I was at school in Coalville I was entered for the examination for entrance to grammar school and to my delight I passed and was given a place at one of the King Edward Grammar Schools in Birmingham. However, due to the cost of uniform, books and school fees, which were charged then, there was no possibility that I could accept the place allocated to me.

By August 1940, I believe Mrs Greasley was being pressed to take a job to help the war effort by the "Direction of Labour" laws, which had come into affect by then. Up until that time there had been no air raids as had been expected, and it was decided that it was safe to return to Birmingham ready to start at Conway Road Senior Elementary School for Girls in September. I remember feeling very desolate as I left the settled dependable and carefree home in Coalville knowing I would be returning to my previous disruptive and insecure lifestyle. But, come what may, I had to get on with it and make the best of it. I never returned to Coalville and I never saw Mr and Mrs Greasley again. I often wished I had but the rapidly changing events of the war years and the fact that I was to be evacuated for a second time in September 1940 prevented me from doing so. I left Birmingham a 10 year old evacuee in 1939, but by the time the war ended in 1945 I was 16 – a young woman in a very grown up world. I savour those happy years in Coalville however, and remember them with gratitude despite the hiccup I experienced at the beginning. For many children the wartime evacuation was a cruel and bitter experience, for me it shaped my life.

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