

Chapter V

The Second World War – Evacuation 1939-1945

(From a History by Sister Mary Baptist)

The threat of a European war led to meetings between the various school authorities and the children's parents. The Government declared London and towns immediately surrounding it "evacuation areas", one of which was Scarborough. In 1938 after the German occupation of Czechoslovakia, preparations for evacuation were made at Croydon, Sanderstead and Forest Hill, but the Munich Agreement gave temporary respite during which plans were shelved. It had been agreed that Coloma and St' Winifride's School should participate in the schemes that were being made for the evacuation of London children whilst the nuns at St. Anne's preferred to make their own arrangements for a private scheme of evacuation.



Mother Winifride

War was declared on the 3rd September 1939 and the Croydon children's turn to be evacuated came on the 5th. On the preceding day they had to go to school to collect their identity discs and get their instructions. On the 5th, three hundred pupils gathered in the school hall at Coloma with a small parcel of clothes and food each. The previous school year had ended with 460 pupils in the Secondary School and 130 in the preparatory School and Kindergarten. They set out by train in the afternoon accompanied by the headmistress, Mother Winifride, four other nuns and some of the lay teachers. No one knew their destination until the next day when a card arrived saying that they were in Eastbourne, a town which, being on the south coast, was not considered by many people, a very safe place.

During the autumn, those Coloma schoolchildren who had not taken part in the evacuation scheme or been sent away to other areas wanted to go on with their education. On 21st November, Mother Winifride returned to Croydon and received forty pupils in the school hall. Mother Marie Lucie was left in charge at Eastbourne. As time went on, the number of pupils at Coloma increased, whilst that at Eastbourne became smaller, as children gradually returned to their homes.

In May 1940, the fall of France made the south coast too dangerous for evacuees and, in June, the children were moved from Eastbourne to Llandeilo, a village in the South of Wales, and lodged with local Welsh families. The three nuns who had accompanied them had great difficulty in finding lodgings owing to the strength of anti-Catholic prejudice that had lasted there for more than two hundred years. In the end, it was the local vicar who took them in. There was no Catholic church in the village, the nearest one being eight miles away. The nun's greatest privation was to be without daily Mass. On the Sunday after their arrival, Mass was said in an Inn. This was only the second time that Mass had been offered in Llandeilo since the Reformation. The nuns then found

lodgings at Ammanford where they could go to daily Mass but they were able to stay there only for a few months, as travelling backwards and forwards to school became a difficult problem when winter arrived.

At the onset of the war, a small contingent of twenty-four of St. Winifride's pupils were evacuated to Merstham in Surrey, being accompanied by Mother Mary Joachim, a lay teacher and some of their mothers. Three weeks later, the first mentioned returned to Forest Hill, leaving the children "in good hands". The Catholic pupils went to school at St. Joseph's Convent at Redhill, whilst the non-Catholics attended a school in Merstham itself. St. Winifride's community was dispersed, though Reverend Mother Elise stayed at Forest Hill with Mother Columba and Sister Lucille. They were able to carry on their work, Reverend Mother having a class of four to eight year olds and Mother Columba the other children, whose ages ranged from eight to fifteen years. Towards the end of November, Mother Celine and two lay teachers joined them.

As in Croydon, many children gradually returned home when the first scare of the war was over and, in the spring of 1940, there was a marked increase in the number pupils attending St. Winifrides's School. An air raid shelter had been completed using half of the school hall and all school activities were being carried on normally. At first, by the special of request of the parents, classes had been held in the mornings only but, later on, there two sessions daily at the usual times. By the end of the summer term, there were over a hundred pupils on the registers, 63 of them being in the Preparatory School. On 3rd May 1940, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of St. Winifride's Convent was celebrated quietly because of the war. There was a Solemn Mass followed by "as grand a dinner as possible" in the school hall and the day ended with Benediction.

At the first threat of war, a place of safety had been sought for St. Anne's pupils. Mr. Goodheart Rendell, a recent convert and the architect of the new Prinknash Abbey, who owned a large property called "Hatchlands" at East Clandon in Surrey, offered it to the nuns rent free, for the duration of the war, he himself being a serving officer in the Grenadier Guards. It was a Georgian-style house with an interior decoration by the famous Adams brothers and, besides the large reception room, had twenty-six bedrooms. It was estimated that in the house and in its outbuildings accommodation could be found for about 115 pupils as well as a community of nuns, the Novitiate from Forest Hill, to help with the work and several lay teachers. The parents agreed to the scheme and plans were drawn up for any emergency. When war broke out, some parents were already at Hatchlands with their children before the nuns arrived! At first there was difficulty in fitting everyone in for Lodging, meals and classes but order was gradually established and, to keep the children occupied, lessons were started at an earlier date than usual.

Everyone at Hatchlands was delighted with the house and park. The latter included a farm and kitchen-garden supplying milk, eggs, poultry and vegetables. A small staff including the butler, a gardener and several assistants, had been left to attend to the maintenance of the premises. Each pupil



had to bring everything needed for personal use including a bed and bedding and table ware as well as clothes. The owner provided the nuns with beds, crockery and kitchen equipment. His most precious furniture was stacked in three large rooms.

Not all St. Anne's pupils were evacuated to Hatchlands; some of those living in Croydon took part in the London scheme and went to Eastbourne where they were taught with the Coloma children; others stayed at home with their parents and these were anxious for the school to reOpen at Sanderstead. This could not take place until October, as an air raid shelter had first to be provided. The basement corridor of the main building was chosen for this purpose. The ceiling was supported by steel girders throughout its length with thick beams set into the walls on either side to support the girders. St. Elizabeth's, a room in the basement, was sealed off against poisonous gas and fitted with an electric stove, an electrical purification system, a radio set for communication with the outside world, sofas, armchairs, etc. In November 1939, Mother Mary Benignus returned from Eastbourne and went to Sanderstead, where the Training College was installed as Sanderstead was considered a safer place than Croydon. In July 1940, the Training College examinations were held there. Invasion was expected at any moment but so far the planes flying over day and night were British.

Scarborough had, as already noted, been declared a "Reception Area" and so, in September 1939, the two nuns working at St. Peter's School found themselves acting as billeting officers. They and their various helpers had to find billets first of all for women and children evacuated from Hull but fewer people came than had been expected, as many did not consider Scarborough a safe area seeing that it had been twice bombarded during the First World War. As a result, about a fortnight or so later, groups of evacuees, women and children, were brought in from West Hartlepool. It was much more difficult to find accommodation for them, as the Scarborough people had heard such tales of the dirty habits of some of the people from the slums of Hull that they were very chary of opening their homes to strangers. However, in the end, places were found for all those who wished to remain in Scarborough, some of the evacuees having decided to return home when they found that they were to be placed for safety in a town that had been bombarded in the previous War.

In the reception area, the problem of carrying out the children's education was solved by sharing the local school premises with the evacuated schools. Thus, at St. Peter's, the local children were taught in the mornings and taken for walks or games on the sands in dry days or supervised in a hall in the town on wet days in the afternoons. The boys from St. Vincent's School, Hull, were taught at St. Peter's in the afternoons by their own staff. A somewhat similar arrangement was made at the Convent, where Our Lady's school children had morning classes one week and afternoon lessons the next, alternating with the evacuees from the school run by the Faithful Companions of Jesus at West Hartlepool. However, Forms V and VI had lessons full time. When the weather was good, the Convent pupils were taken for walks, swimming at Peasholm Lake or games on the sands, when not having lessons. As the morning or afternoon sessions were lengthened to fit in as many lessons as possible, the staff were kept fully occupied. Before the end of the session 1939-1940, so many of the evacuees had returned home that the remaining few were incorporated into the Convent School and the ordinary school routine was resumed.

As far as possible in war-time conditions, the nuns strove to carry on their religious life in accordance with their rule. The Music Room in Hatchlands was converted into a chapel where they were fortunate enough to have daily Mass. For a time the Josephite Fathers used to come over

from Weybridge; sometimes, Father Dolman, the parish priest of Sydenham, came to stay for a few days for a rest and, later, a resident chaplain was appointed. As contact with Belgium had become impossible, Reverend Mother Constance acted as the regional or provincial superior for the period of the war. Clothing and profession ceremonies took place in England, usually at Croydon, beginning there at Easter 1940 when Mother Mary Dominic and Marie Victoire made their final vows, the first time that ceremony had even been held in England. In the following August, the ceremonies of profession, and clothing were again held in Coloma chapel but, in April 1941, owing to continual air raids on Croydon, they took place at Hatchlands.

In July 1940, a group of Belgian refugees moved into the Novitiate house at Forest Hill which had been empty since the Novitiate had gone to Hatchlands to help with the evacuees there.

On 15th August 1940, the first German air raid on Croydon occurred and, from October onwards, during the Battle of Britain, there were continual raids on the London area. Croydon was a special target, as it was at that time the site of London's civilian airport and some of the main railway lines to the South Coast passed through it. One bomb fell near Coloma, breaking most of the windows but fortunately no one was hurt. Lessons were held in the air raid shelter.

On the night of 30th September 1940, a land mine completely demolished St. Winifride's High School, killing three lay sisters, Sisters Dymphna, Lucille and Francis who were sleeping in the cellar. The rest of the community who were in the air raid shelter escaped unharmed, though badly shocked. This air raid shelter had been made out of half of the school hall next to the chapel and was separated from the demolished building only by the stage and other half of the hall. After this disaster, the rest of the community at Forest Hill was dispersed among the other convents but, at Easter 1941, at the earnest request of the parents, St. Winifride's Preparatory School reopened with about twenty pupils. Mother Columba and Mother Mary Clement went there daily by bus from Croydon and were helped by a former pupil. By September there were 36 pupils who were accommodated in the convent, as the nuns could not afford to pay for the heating of two buildings. On 6th November, Mass was said at St. Winifride's for the first time since the evacuation. In the year 1942, they had nearly sixty pupils and in September of that year, the numbers had increased to 82, which included some of the senior girls who had returned to their "alma mater" from Sydenham High School. In the following September, the numbers had risen to a hundred, and one class had to be accommodated on the stage in the hall.

Meanwhile, about mid-Lent 1943, the Belgian evacuees moved out of the Novitiate house and Mother Anastasia and one of the novices went there for a day to tidy it up. They found the task too great; so, after the clothing at Easter, the whole of the Novitiate went over to St. Monica's for a day to do some more cleaning and to celebrate the completion of the translation of the Belgian Life of the Founder into English. This had been done mostly during "fire-watching" at Hatchlands by Sister Mary Baptist.

"Fire- watching" was the current phrase at Hatchlands for air raid warden duty at night to keep a look-out for fires started by incendiary bombs. It was a very serious and rather trying job in towns like Croydon and Scarborough, though it had its lighter moments and was a means of getting to know one's neighbours better; in a country place like Hatchlands it was something of a sinecure and the fire that watched was generally the one in the staff room grate! The watch was divided into



two parts, one up to 1.00am and the other from 1.00am until the nuns and novices got up about 5.40am. Only on one occasion was a stick of six bombs dropped in the park but for many nights there was a bright red glow in the sky over London where there were nightly raids with incendiary and other bombs.

For the two years from 1941, the Ministry of Labour occupied the Preparatory School premises at Bedford Park, Croydon, as offices, and the Preparatory School pupils were accommodated in three classrooms in the Secondary School. However, when the Battle of Britain air raids were over, children were recalled in increasing numbers. At the end of the school year 1941-1942, it was decided to bring back the evacuees from Llandeilo and about sixty pupils, four nuns and three lay teachers returned to Croydon. In September 1942, there were over four hundred children in Coloma Secondary School and a hundred in the Preparatory School; so conditions were rather cramped until the Ministry of Labour handed back the Preparatory School buildings in July 1943. There had been few air raids during the previous winter and it was considered safe to bring the Training College students back from Sanderstead to Coloma for the session beginning in September 1943.

The 17th June 1944 was the seventy-fifth anniversary of the founding of Coloma and great celebrations had been planned for the occasion. However, the eve of that day was marked by the first flying-bomb attack. There were air raid warnings all day and the bombing continued all night and throughout the next day. All the windows in the convent were broken, many ceilings were down and doors torn off their hinges, but the celebrations went on all the same with the Mayor of Croydon and some of the town councillors present. There was even the traditional garden fete in the afternoon!

On June 21st, St. Winifride's convent was badly damaged by a bomb and the nuns from Forest Hill took refuge at Coloma and Sanderstead. The school remained open, two nuns going over from Croydon every day and being helped by two lay teachers. It is recorded that at that time the school was 50% Catholic. There were many non-Catholic pupils in the schools belonging to the Ladies of Mary. This shows the esteem in which they were held not only for their academic work but also for the training they gave in spiritual and moral values and in etiquette and general good behaviour. It helped to break down anti-Catholic prejudice.

With the advent of the flying bombs or "doodle-bugs" as the V-1 Rockets were generally called; the number of pupils in the London area quickly diminished, as parents sent their children away to safer areas. As the evacuation to Llandeilo had been given up, Coloma was not in a position to ask for another evacuation, and so the schools there remained open and work was carried on as best as possible, often in the air raid shelter. The School Certificate examinations in July 1944 were held in the Gymnasium next door to that shelter. In those days, as during the Battle of Britain, whenever the whining notes of the air raid siren were heard, everyone who could took refuge in a specially constructed air raid shelter until the single note of the "all clear" was sounded. If the engine of "Doodle-bug" stopped over your head, you knew you were safe as it would fall to ground about two miles away.

In August 1944, it was considered desirable to send the two oldest nuns from Forest Hill, Mother Elitrude and Sister Rose, to stay with the Sisters of Mercy in Wolverhampton, which was considered to be "far way from the danger zone". The Preparatory School and Novitiate House there had been badly damaged by a bomb that fell nearby, but they were repaired for the reopening of the school

in the September of that year. The children gradually returned and by Christmas there were 75 pupils on the registers.

In that same August, St. Anne's took advantage of the government-sponsored scheme of evacuation and, as a result about 270 children, whose ages ranged from four to eighteen years, found themselves lodged in the Dunblane Hydro, a large hotel, not very far from Stirling, with a grand view of the Grampian Highlands. The Scottish authorities generously provided the necessary equipment which was on a rather large scale, the smallest jug, ironically referred to as the "cream jug", being just a quart sized one. The community comprised eleven nuns and they were assisted by many of the lay staff and a number of parents and relatives of the children. There was much work to be done and one old lady spent her time preparing bread and butter! In spite of the distance from Sanderstead, the nuns were relieved to be away from danger in such beautiful and quiet surroundings. They were fortunate in having a chaplain to say Mass for them daily. An old priest, Fr. Cary-Elwes, who was staying with relatives in the district, used to come in and take choir practice from time to time; he kept the children so long that on one occasion they arranged the hands of the clock to think it was later than it was! School was carried on as well as possible and there were occasional outings, as, for example, to Callander and to Edinburgh. During the winter, the rising sun tinted the snow on the mountains with delicate shades of yellow, orange and red and the children at breakfast in the big dining-room used to get up from their places to admire the lovely view!

There were drawbacks as well as pleasures at Dunblane. One was a chickenpox being introduced. It broke out in waves and every three weeks, and led to a wing of the hotel being set aside for the victims; another was dirty hair which resulted in very a intensive de-lousing programme to which many of the staff generously devoted themselves. Then there was the great distance from home, which gave the community a sense of isolation; some of the children were so homesick, that they had to be fetched home by their parents. As in other cases of evacuation, the numbers returning home increased as the V-1 or "doodle-bug" raids decreased and by Easter there a hundred children fewer at Dunblane with the likelihood of still more being recalled home. It was deemed advisable for the whole party to return to Sanderstead and this was done shortly after Easter (1945). In gratitude for what the nuns and their helpers had done for their children during their stay at Dunblane, the parents insisted on presenting the community with a painted glass window which was set up in the entrance hall of St. Anne's Convent.

Meanwhile, the nuns at Croydon and Forest Hill and those remaining at St. Anne's carried on their work as best they could, though with fewer pupils, during the school year of 1944-1945. At Coloma, the school reopened in September 1944 with about 300 pupils but the year ended with 500 pupils in the Secondary School and 175 in the Preparatory School. There were fresh V-bomb attacks in the spring of 1944-1945, when the V-2 rockets were launched. Finally on the 8th May 1945, Victory Day in Europe (V-E Day) was celebrated. At Coloma, the nuns sang the "Te Deum" and the pupils were given two days extra holiday. At Hatchlands there was a bonfire and the novices recorded that they watched the floodlights over London where the sky was "all crossed by circling lights". Next day, there was a picnic for the pupils to the Silent Pool, the Pilgrims' Way and St. Martha's Church, a favourite outing for special treats. The novices walked from Hatchlands to Guildford but were brought back in the parish priest's car.

A sad note was struck just after the end of the war by the death of the Headmistress of Coloma and St. Anne's Secondary Schools. Mother Therese-Marie, the head of St. Anne's, who had been

suffering from cancer for some time, had to be brought back from hospital in Edinburgh at Easter by ambulance 'plane. Mother Winifride, who had been Headmistress at Coloma for twenty-six years, died rather suddenly from complications after an operation which in itself had been successful. These two deaths seem to have heralded the many changes that were to take place in the post-war years.



Sr. Mary Baptist Taylor