

Wartime Evacuation 1940

Alec Kingsmill Ken Martin Ernest Potter

Alec Kingsmill

Dear Colin,

I can see that you are doing a noble job..

I enclose a copy of some of my schoolday recollections, relative to Mitcham County School's presence at Weston-super-Mare during WW2 (October 1940 – July 1942), along with copies of some of the papers relating to the 'eleven plus' (as it became) exam of 1941. I have also included a copy of Mr Doig's letter relating to the return of the school to Mitcham, following the damage to the Weston school during the June '42 air raids.

I don't think that my write up does justice to the evacuated Mitcham school, - the whole era was too transient - which as you see lasted in Weston for about 20 months or so. In subsequent visits to London I stayed with Alan Crawford and Eric Lamburne at various times (one time Mitcham evacuees in Weston), but save a visit to the school at Mitcham to attend a boxing match (I think I recall) – not as a participant! - I had no subsequent involvement with the school.

Because of a onetime computer glitch, I am afraid that I only have hard copies of my recollections, which because of the longer duration, more comprehensively cover my start at Leo Street (Peckam), the evacuated Rothschild School, from Acton, in Dorchester, Dorset and then Weston-super-Mare Grammar School, than they do of Mitcham County at Weston. However I hope they might be of marginal interest.. I finished up in Engineering at Bristol University, after National Service in REME.

I hope that this is of some interest.

Best wishes,



Alec Kingsmill.

PS In my narrative, I seem to have omitted the fact that at Weston, the Mitcham School was co-educational. A.

School again, but this time, for good. I have never been back - well until 11th September 2002..

LOWER MITCHAM COUNCIL SCHOOL, MITCHAM, SURREY

Because Hackbridge School was not being evacuated, the two of us from Carshalton Road who were to be evacuated had to be attached to another school - Lower Mitcham Council School. Thus on the day of the evacuation, we attended for the first time, a school of whom we knew nobody - neither pupils nor teachers. The day of the evacuation was 3rd October 1940, a dull and overcast day. I went by bus with my father, to Mitcham ('The Cricketers') and from there walked to our new school. I certainly recall my gas mask, but have no recollection of how I carried the rest of my gear probably in a small case. I recall lots of children there and we were given our identification labels to be pinned to our coats. Surprisingly, mine has survived. At some time I said goodbye to my mother, at home, and to my father at the school, but I recall neither. I think the overall feeling was one of excitement. We eventually set out in London Transport buses, a seat on the top deck being more important than thoughts of where we were going. The buses went in the direction of Central London, eventually arriving at Paddington Station. Because of the invasion scare, all railway station signs had been removed, so we hadn't a clue, nor did we seem to worry, where we were, or where we were going.



This well known Paddington Station picture was taken a few months before my own evacuation but it is very reminiscent of October 1940. I must have looked not unlike the labelled fellow in the front - the one with his right arm outstretched.

Eventually we arrived at what I later knew to be the onetime Locking Road excursion platform at Weston-super-Mare, in Somerset. We walked in lines to Locking Road School - about half a mile. I recall many local young helpers (probably Scouts) willing to carry our bags but I am afraid that we took a very churlish attitude, and declined rather positively.

At Locking Road School, we dispersed into several classrooms and were given bread and jam and tea. By then a number of children were

rather fractious but my companion and I still seemed quite buoyant. There were no would-be foster parents there choosing their future guests (as I believe happened at some centres), but slowly the number of children seemed to dwindle as they were presumably carried off by car to their billets. We were towards the end. Eventually a lady took us to her car and drove us to what we were to learn was 74, Beach Road, Weston-super-Mare.

74, Beach Road, a substantial house of some five bedrooms, was the home of Mr and Mrs Helliker, their daughter Ruth and their sons, David and Tony. What did influence our new lifestyle was that soon after we arrived the Helliker children got the measles, followed by my fellow evacuee. I did not succumb - my Dorchester diary shows that I had what I called 'Adolf's [presumably 'German'] measles' during that time, and perhaps this gave me

some immunity. I don't think that any of them were seriously unwell but it put us all in quarantine, and almost before we had started we stopped going to school.

We two evacuees must have been on somebody's list but we were hardly known to our new school, and had had less than a weeks attendance at Walliscote Road School, (where the



Contemplating a crashed Wolseley, in the era of no schooling - October 1940. I am on the left, my evacuee colleague is on the right..

evacuated school was now housed), before measles intervened. In retrospect I am now rather amazed at how readily we accepted this almost casual attachment to the school with whom we had travelled.

Fortunately, concepts of stress were invented much later. Just after that, our own house in Mitcham was made uninhabitable by bombing and my parents came down for a first view as to whether they should start anew in Weston - by

then my father had his own small electric motor repair business. My father was very concerned at my complete lack of schooling. Mitcham County School was also evacuated to Weston, and my father sought interview with the Headmaster, Mr A.J.Doig. He lived at that time in the Cabot Hotel and we saw him there. He fortunately agreed that (later) I could sit a short written examination with a view to joining the school as a fee payer. My parents went back to London after 4 days.

Sometime later I took this written exam at the County School. The evacuated Mitcham County School (co-educational in its evacuated form) shared the premises with Weston County School for Boys - Weston in the morning and Mitcham in the afternoon and Saturday mornings. The exam was taken in a small anteroom to the headmaster's study. I didn't find it too difficult and finished within the allotted time. What I do recall however is that the writing equipment was a plain nibbed pen with a rather large version of those near hexagon profiled Waterman ink bottles that could be placed on one of the profiles to get better access to the ink, when the bottle was near empty. Trying to kill time I experimented with this rather full bottle and alas the top came adrift and a rather large dollop of ink splattered on the desk. Fortunately it missed my papers, but fearing that my secondary education would be terminated before it had begun, I mopped up the ink with my handkerchief. Fortunately, I did satisfy Mr. Doig.

MITCHAM COUNTY SCHOOL (AT WESTON-SUPER-MARE)

So early in December, I started at the evacuated Mitcham County School as a fee payer. The fee was 4 guineas (£4.20) per term. Just after that my father came down to restart his business, which indeed he carried on at the same premises, until he retired in 1960. So I was now back with my parents but the culture remained very much that of evacuees.

When I joined the evacuated Mitcham County in the December, I was conscious that I had entered a new culture, and although my fellow classmates had had a comparably traumatic time they had had at least some time to adjust, together. I was the lone newcomer. For one thing the various subjects were taught by different teachers so there wasn't a regular face, a regular teacher, with whom to become familiar, as I had been used to. Then there was homework, eventually quite a bit to offset the shorter school hours, and there was the school cap, and prefects. We went to school on Saturday mornings, setting off at that time of the year, in the dark. There were new subjects, particularly French, and the notion that all nouns had a gender quite baffled me. I thought that I must have missed a vital explanation in the weeks that I had missed. None of these things were really great shakes, but there was no time for transition and I found it all a little disturbing. I remember being quite tearful over my first homework assignment - on my very first day. It was from the English mistress and she wanted us to simply write a few paragraphs on 'an aeroplane' and underline all the verbs in the narrative. To me, aeroplanes had wings, with wing spans, numbers of engines, guns, crew. I just couldn't conjure up a simple story that was wanted, and I near despaired. In the end I got something down, but the work was not collected on the next day - maybe it was just a self choice exercise. Although eventually I did quite a lot of it, it was the first and last time I ever got het up, over homework.

But school at that time was suddenly no longer a joy and from the lofty, one of the first three places in the class that I had held since the year dot, I was now down to beyond half way.



The Mitcham uniform - the blazer in green and the cap likewise, but with lavender hoops. Taken in May 1941.



Alan, Margaret, Pat and I on Weston sea front, on a Sunday afternoon. School caps had to be worn at all times.

Yet things did improve. Inevitably things which seemed so strange at the outset became the commonplace and schooling reverted to a regular routine. School uniform could still be purchased from an outfitters in Mitcham, and besides the obligatory school cap I had the Mitcham blazer - a strange element of normality in a world that was pretty dire. Yet again the war was a source of interest and of some excitement and my near passion for aeroplanes was well sublimated. Weston was quite heavily raided on the night of 4th/5th January 1941, and the night siren reflecting raids on Cardiff and Bristol, was commonplace, but these seem to have no impact on the school - that was to come later. Another Mitcham evacuee (Alan Crawford) came to live with us for a while and with the occasional, oh so innocent company of two neighbouring girls (Margaret Lucas and Pat

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McFarlane) life improved greatly. Little did I know that my future wife lived only a bit further down the road. Of course all this was set against the prevailing environment of the time and we lived (as we all did) in a house which must have been fearfully cold, a weekly bath at best, and of course, food rationing and the blackout.

On the 7th March 1941, I took the 'Scholarship' (later-day 11+) and passed, relieving my father of having to pay the 4 guineas a term. It was later fortuitous that this was a Somerset County Council award. I still have the exam papers I have often wondered how these questions would compare with comparable tests these days, although £.s.d. and Imperial measures would now make a direct test of the arithmetic papers well nigh impossible. The English papers however might make the basis of an interesting comparative test. Because I took the scholarship when I was already at the school for which it was intended, I started as a new *scholarship* boy in the *second* form and remained one year younger than the average age of my form until 1947 (see later). Copies of the 'scholarship' exam papers are at the end of this narrative.

So again, school became routine, and I was again, at ease. Except for the Headmaster's letter that eventually bought it all to an end, I seem to have no paper work from that era. That era only lasted 18 months, during which time I think I clawed my way back up to about 8th in the class exams, before we had the major air raids on Weston on the nights of 27th/28th and 28th/29th June 1942. During these raids, the girls' half of the school was destroyed by incendiary bombs, space was at a premium, as a result of which, Mitcham went back to



Bomb damage at Weston-super-Mare.

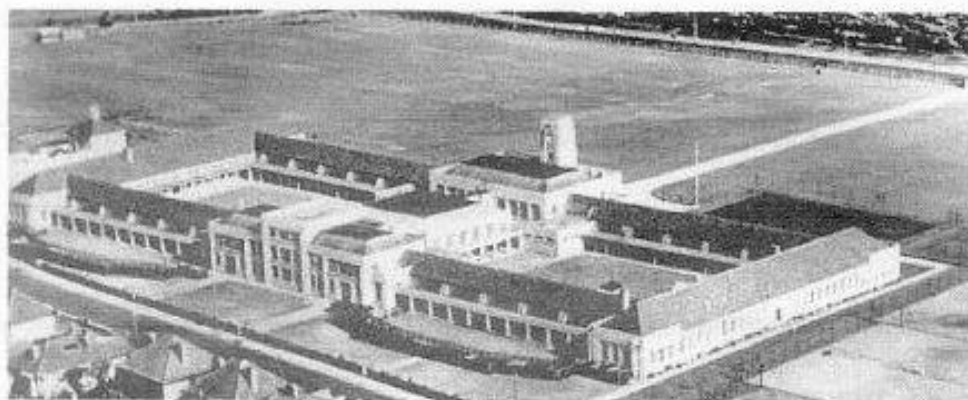
Mitcham. There was, of course, no purpose in me returning to Mitcham, and accordingly I stayed on in Weston. The local authorities however informed my father that there was no vacancy at Weston County School for Boys, who with the County School for Girls were the surviving occupants of the damaged school. I can still recall my embarrassment (and later heartfelt thanks) at the rather forceful discussion my father had (he was still very much a Londoner) with the education authorities in an office near Walliscote Road School, contesting this decision. He cited the 'Assisted Place award' (i.e. the scholarship), as being of Somerset's authority, not Surrey's, and somehow that led to a place being found. On reflection I can see that the two interventions of my father, recalled in these recollections, (getting me to Mitcham County in the first place and then to Weston County at this stage) were quite crucial to my subsequent education. Indeed there was a third, later on. I should have been much more grateful.

In September 1942, I started at Weston County School, no longer as an evacuee, but as a local resident. My second evacuation was over.

WESTON COUNTY SCHOOL FOR BOYS, WESTON-SUPER-MARE

Well at the beginning I didn't like Weston County either (by now I was twelve). In fact, I disliked it a lot, but it was surely my fault. No one was unpleasant, the lessons although different in emphasis were reasonably familiar, being an ex-evacuee seem to have no stigma, but I was unhappy - *very* unhappy. When my father asked me what the problem was I couldn't explain it. There had been some 'rude' banter, (not aimed at me), and I think that I tried to blame that. I certainly *hated* rugby, and I certainly didn't see myself as being in any way, athletic. But life goes on, and indeed it did - to change quite quickly into the beginning of six years of excellent schooling, with very good friends, a surprising number of whom, approaching sixty years later, survive to this day - an era, like Dorchester, which I now recall with very considerable affection.

At the outset, my position in the class dipped again - to 16th out of 34. (*'Has worked satisfactorily, but not always with good results'*). Two years later, when written class positions seemed to cease, I was 7th. (*'A good report'*). I think I levelled off about there. At some time, fairly early on, I attended a school medical, at the end of which the doctor, seemingly alluding to a low blood pressure or slow pulse (or some such), said 'you ought to be a good athlete'. With that, I decided to buck my ideas up. By the time I left the school, I had my athletics colours, I was a regular member of the rugby 1st XV, did generally well in cross country - but was hopeless at cricket. For that I settled at being the scorer for the 1st XI, being called to play just once when we were short, on an away game (at Bridgwater). So at



✠ Weston County School before the war. In the June '42 air raids, the classrooms around the right hand quadrangle were destroyed by incendiary bombs, after which (the boys and the girls) had to share the remaining half. The evacuated schools that up till that time had also shared the premises, returned to London.

least I can say that I also *played* for the 1st XI.

I joined the school Scout Troop, and in many ways that was the principal catalyst for the transition in my enjoyment of the school. It wasn't a very Scouty scout troop in the sense that we had no 'den' of our own and only met in the rather austere school hall, after school on Fridays. Yet the companionship was excellent (even if that doctors fillip above, was augmented earlier on, by a good friend of mine - the one standing next to me in the picture

Ken Martin

I am not sure when the school decided to evacuate from Mitcham but it was during the latter months of the year, probably September/early October 1940.

I cannot recall anything of the journey but late one afternoon we arrived at a Church Hall at an unknown destination. Local stewards came to take us to temporary accommodation for the night. My group were billeted in a large house on the seafront with a lovely view of a steep sided island out at sea. This we came to know was Steephholm with its sister, Flatholm, a few miles away in the Bristol Channel. We had arrived at Weston Super Mare.

The following morning eleven of us, all boys, were taken to our billet.

This was a small three bedroom terraced house. Downstairs there was a front room, a middle room, and a kitchen at the back, with the toilet behind.

It was located in a narrow service road behind the High Street shops.

Our Foster Parents had the use of two adjacent houses, one of which they occupied together with two older evacuees, Ken and Bert from Barking Abbey School.

All 13 evacuees had the use of the front room in this house. This was our living room for meals and recreational purposes.

The ground floor of the other house was used for a newspaper distribution business, Lola; the 'maid of all work' occupied the smallest bedroom. We had the use of the other two bedrooms, which were furnished with two double beds and one single bed for eleven children.

One older boy had the custody of his two young brothers aged five and seven and not unreasonably claimed one double bed. This left just one double bed, and one single bed, for the remaining eight evacuees. We slept five to a double bed and three to a single bed.

There was no bath available to us in either house. We were obliged to use the Public Slipper Bath at the end of the Promenade.

We rarely saw our Foster Mother who was a very large person. The one occasion I do recall seeing her was when I was asked to visit her in the middle room, the only time I was allowed in there. She then asked me if I would go to the butchers for some stewing steak, as Lola was indisposed.

Upon my return I was offered a sweet from a huge box of chocolates. It did not occur to me until later that the chocolates were probably obtained with our sweet ration, which we never saw.

I cannot recall having any conversation with my Foster Father. He would sometimes come into the house dressed in a collarless shirt together with a dark jacket and trousers, the legs of which were tied up with string at the ankle.

Lola was the person who did all the housework, the cleaning, and served our meals.

At teatime each person's plate would have his allotted share of butter/margarine and jam.

We used to cycle about 1½ miles to the Grammar School at Uphill. It was a modern school, one half for the girls, and the other for the boys, with a central Administration Block.

It was now used not only by the local children, but also by others from Barking Abbey and Mitcham County Schools. Needless to say our education was very limited.

We had the use of one half of the school in the morning only from a Monday to Wednesday and again on Friday morning. Thursday morning we did supervised homework at a Church Hall.

It was not really practicable to use the house for homework with 12 others also using the room for various activities and Lola wishing to lay the table, clear the table, cleaning etc. The only alternative was the Library, which I used from time to time.

We were all exhorted to help the war effort in one-way or another. I joined the Air Training Corps and decided that if ever I had to join the Forces I wanted nothing to do with the Morse Code. A valuable lesson learned.

Like a lot of other evacuees I had my bicycle at Weston and used it regularly to go on local trips to Cheddar, Wells etc. Always remembering to take my Gas Mask, of course.

One Easter, I organised a party of four, to cycle home for the Easter holiday. We met at the traffic lights on the Locking Road at 6 am and despite a headwind we arrived in Marlborough about lunchtime. For the latter part of the journey we took it in turns to be the leading pair. We finally reached home in Carshalton, Surrey at 9 pm, after a 150 miles cycle ride in the one day, very tired, but triumphant.

One day, three weeks later I cycled back to Weston Super Mare.

My pocket money at this time was two shillings (10p) a week which did not go very far towards the purchase of necessities like Postage stamps, toothpaste, hair cream and writing materials. I decided it was about time that I did a newspaper delivery round for my Foster father for the sum of five shillings (25p) a week. This entailed getting up at 6.30a.m. when the papers arrived, in order to complete the paper round and be ready for breakfast at 8.am before cycling to school.

One June night I was awakened by the sound of very low flying aircraft, which may have just taken off from the nearby Locking Airport. Almost immediately the Air Raid Siren was sounded. We hurriedly dressed and went into the surface Air Raid Shelter almost adjacent to the house. We were soon joined by a number of other people, who also thought that the aircraft we heard, were Beaufighters from Locking.

It was not long before we heard some bombs whistling down but they were not accompanied by the loud thud or explosion we had heard at home during the 'Blitz' It transpired it was an incendiary raid.

Some hours later, when we were allowed to leave the Shelter, the little service road was full of fire engines and ancillary equipment. Hoses were everywhere. It was then that I noticed that Marks and Spencers on the other side of the service road opposite our house had been completely destroyed.

We were very lucky.

Later that morning I cycled to school to commence our School Certificate examinations.

Unfortunately the school had received a direct hit by a bomb, which had destroyed part of the building including one set of exam papers.

We were locked in the hall whilst the local children went into the classrooms to commence the examination. We were then dismissed with instruction to return at a particular time.

When we returned the examination had finished, all the papers examined and whilst we were again locked in the hall the other children were then dismissed.

We then entered the classroom and commenced the examination with the same examination papers.

I subsequently learned that I did not do very well in that exam and pondered whether our receipt of only 40% of schooling had something to do with it.

Further schooling at Weston was obviously out of the question and we all returned home.

Later I re-sat the examination at Mitcham and passed the School Certificate.

Extract from BBC Peoples War

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/93/a5935593.shtml>

Ernest Potter

When we were evacuated on 3rd October 1940 I had been at school for only three or four weeks. My GCSE (Now "O" levels) were taken in 1945 in school. In 1944 they had been taken sitting in the school air raid shelters using drawing boards as desks.

At Weston we were a co-ed school with Mitcham Girls' School.



Ernest Potter Cyril Madden Alan Crawford ? (Tub)

At the time we were all billeted at 12 Marine Drive and the photo was taken near Madeira Cove. When we arrived from Mitcham in October 1940 Alan and I, each with a young sister, were the last of our group of evacuees to be collected from 'Glass' Hotel by a taxi that called at various houses to find us a billet. No one wanted both boys and girls until we were taken in, after nine o'clock on a wet night, out of pity by Mrs Black, 55 Walliscote Road. She did not want boys but it took two weeks for Alan and I to find other accommodation. My sister stayed with Mrs B for all our time at Weston.



Ernest Potter