

Evacuated To Caerleon 1940-1943

Derek Leach - From an article by Bessie Newton (nee Laurie)

During the Second World War most Dover schoolchildren and their teachers were evacuated to South Wales. Bessie Newton (nee Laurie) attended Dover County School for Girls from 1937 to 1943, and some years later wrote this account of her three-year evacuation.

The various and varying circumstances of life in Caerleon must make younger, post-war old girls wonder why this period is remembered so vividly. What is obvious is that the experience was different for each of us. Hardly surprising for, though we were all County School girls, we ranged in age from 11 to 18 years old and were an amalgam of fee paying and scholarship pupils from a wide socio-economic background. Yet, in the space of 24 hours, this heterogeneous group came under one uniform label, 'evacuees', and were alienated from the prime influences in their lives as far (apart from school) of family and familiar surroundings.

Very much later I came to realise the extent of the burden imposed on the teaching staff, who up to then had been involved with us, apart from extracurricular activities, only in normal school time. Yet now they were expected to take on our pastoral care, with all that entailed, as well as coping with the resultant academic and personal problems that arose. The manner in which they did this earned the long-lasting affection and gratitude of many girls. Strict yes, but tempered with humour, patience, tolerance and empathy.

Most of us thought evacuation would only be for a short while when we steamed away from Dover Priory on that bright June day, all of us suitably labelled and

complete with suitcase, sandwiches and gas mask. We reached Caerleon after a tedious and devious journey, filled with apprehension. Betty McPherson (nee Robson) and I were taken to a tiny cottage by the river where, troubled by our inability to understand our Welsh hosts and terrified by the sight of water rats on the riverbank, we spent a sleepless night. In the morning, we untruthfully told them that our stay was only meant to be one night and left. No doubt the teachers were dismayed when we marched in, vowing we would not go back there!

Though I did not realise it then, from that day a three-year period began, which challenged all previously held concepts. I came from a closely-knit family severely affected by the economic climate of the thirties. Though my mother was my rock, encouraging me always, neither she nor my father were able to help me much with academic subjects. Discipline at home was strict, reasons for it often unexplained of the 'because I told you to' variety. From this background I was put into (I realized later) an upper middle-class environment,



Caerleon School Class 2 Photograph 1943

which, up until then, I had only experienced through books and films. The house was large with many spacious rooms and back stairs, which continued up to the attic where the maid slept. The gardens and conservatory were lovingly tended by the gardener.

It is hardly surprising that adjusting to all this was, in the early stages, reflected in rebellion and questioning authority at school. Helen Bradely's memories of Caerleon brought back many shared experiences, though when she talked about 'biddable' girls I doubt whether any member of staff would have so described me in the early days. I did adjust, admonished by letters from home, following adverse reports from the Head, benefitting from teachers' guidance and the advantageous environment provided by my hosts, Mr. and Mrs. Davies and their widowed daughter.

Apart from the restraints the Davies thought any 14-year-old girl needed, they expected me to organize my own life. They discussed current affairs with me in an adult way, encouraging me to voice my own opinions and also to work hard at school, closely monitoring my progress. The great bonus for me was their wide range of books; with my reading uncensored I drowned in a sea of poetry and prose.

Mr. Davies was great fun. With business connections in the farming community, we went on many sorties, returning with untold delights in those days of rationing. I ate very well! They took me out often, visiting beautiful homes and gardens and much of south Wales. Their friends were quite generous. One in particular always gave me half a crown, which was very much appreciated. With these activities plus school, Girl Guides, music and

outings with friends, the time passed quickly.

Should you think that it all sounds unclouded bliss, I assure you it was not. I missed my family and growing up with my brother and sister. We trekked from one teaching venue to another, often in abysmal weather, seemingly never dry or warm. The trauma of Miss Rusbridge's death affected us deeply. The problems of adolescence were not so readily discussed then; we had to face them, often ill-informed.

"After three years I left Caerleon, enriched and matured by the experience, indebted to my parents for their unfailing support throughout and to staff for understanding the reasons for my rebellious behaviour and doing something to help. I also left with the gift of friends who remain so today and gratitude to my hosts, not only for the obvious material benefits, but for the independence of thought and action which they nurtured in me."

From Molly Davies memories of Tanhouse Farm, Caerleon (1940's)

Before the War, Mill Street was very quiet. Nearly all of the traffic travelled through High Street, which was then 'two way'. During the War, there was a lot of military activity in Caerleon. Soldiers were stationed here which meant the 'toing and froing' of many vehicles - including ones for producing a smokescreen.

In 1943 a tragic accident occurred in the congested High Street. A teacher from Dover High School for Girls, who was evacuated to Caerleon along with her pupils, was knocked from her cycle and killed. The local authority, seeing that something had to be done to ease the traffic congestion, trialled a one-way system. Traffic travelled up High Street and then returned to Newport down Mill Street.

Editor