

THE SCHOOL AT WAR

The story of Windlesham House During World War II

Windlesham had a fascinating time during the Second World War, a period of great excitement, which provided many deep and much-cherished memories for the pupils who lived through it.

At the outset, it was decided that the school should 'stay put' and so sandbags were filled and staff acted as ARP wardens. However, once France fell in the summer of 1940, Churchill ordered the evacuation of all schools in the south-east of England. Faced with this problem, Windlesham managed to find temporary space for the latter part of that term with Edgarley Hall, Millfield's prep department, near Street in Somerset, moving there on June 21st. Tales are still told of the journey there by coach, via a sight-seeing stop in Salisbury.

As those coaches left the Highden site, so Canadian soldiers marched in to take over the school and grounds. With 'the ranks' accommodated in Nissen huts and tents in the ground, only the officers lived in the house itself, but there remains much graffiti evidence of the Canadian occupation of the school. Canadian forces were based at Windlesham, Parham House and Wiston House, using the Downs between as their training area, from where many were to go on the ill-fated Dieppe raid and from which large numbers did not return.

With stables being used as classrooms, for example, the Edgarley site did prove, unsurprisingly, to be too crowded for use by two schools and very fortunately Windlesham was able to secure a highly suitable alternative location just outside Ambleside in the Lake District. So, as the new school year began, Windlesham was re-established at Croft Lodge, very near to Lake Windermere. Though several parents decided to remove their children to even greater safety, in Australia and Canada for example, many pupils were now joined by their sisters. There was, therefore, a time of co-education some 25 years before that move was made officially.

The nearly five war years called for much initiative on the part of both staff and pupils and it is fair to record that some unusual events took place. Fitness was maintained by a Sergeant-Major drilling the pupils for an hour each morning, but the adjacent 'fells' provided a very healthy natural exercise area too. Sports matches were played against other evacuated schools, including a couple of ignominious defeats on the cricket field by the 'nearby' Roedean girls. Church services were held at Holy Trinity, Brathay, where in an odd coincidence the church is built, like our All Saints' Chapel, on a 'wrong' north/south orientation.

The school, like everyone else, was subject to rationing and though it was seen as 'pretty ghastly,' feeding the numbers that the Lake District had to sustain during the War was a very hard task. However, this situation one day led to a 'revolution' with 40 or so pupils barricading themselves into the kitchens! Having found there only bread and raisins to eat, they did in fact not hold out long. But the very kind and

gentle head, Mr Chris, then had what must have been for him the most appalling task of beating a large proportion of the school, appalling mentally and also exhausting physically.

Eventually, once D-Day was proving to be the success prayed for, preparations began to 'return home.' Autumn Term 1944 was full of Lake District farewells and then, on January 19th 1945, the Spring Term began with the school once more in its Highden home. The impact of the war was to prove long-lasting, though what, of course, remains in pupils minds longest of all is the extraordinary amount of munitions found over subsequent years in the Windlesham grounds. Into the late 80s, bullets and shell cases, some live, some not, were still being lovingly cherished under pillows overnight, before 'spilling the beans' to matron in the morning. Yes, the Bomb Disposal Squad were to be kept very busy, as the noisy evidence of controlled explosions made clear for some many years!