

David Arnold would like to hear from readers of *County Yarns* who have stories and illustrations about Sussex to share with us. Email david.arnold@me.com or write to him at 14 St John Street, Lewes, East Sussex BN7 2QE.

# Down from London! The 1939 Tooting Bec boy evacuees

**F**ormer Tooting Bec Grammar School pupil David Dombey posted the following on the BBC's World War II People's War website archive:

"In 1939 I was living with my parents and younger sister in Streatham. Aged 12, I had just started at Bec Grammar School (Tooting) when the entire school, with over 500 boys, was evacuated to a small village, Chailey, north of Lewes in September of that year.

"I was placed (billeted) with two other boys in a lonely cottage owned by two maiden ladies.

"We subsequently spent a glorious autumn exploring the countryside, which many of us, as city children of families with no car, had simply never experienced.

"I do recollect when my mother and father first came to visit.

"The journey from London by train and bus had been long and tiring.

"It was most unfortunate for them that just as they arrived at my billet I was preparing to go fishing (another novel new adventure for me) and instead of properly greeting them I rushed off with my friends - much to the utter disgust of my parents!

"By Christmas 1939 new arrangements were made for us to be moved to Lewes where there was a Grammar School with the proper facilities for us to continue our education.

"Bec shared their premises, with each of us using it for either mornings or afternoons.

"I remember one Lewes family I stayed with where the father was called Donald Hugh McDonald and he proudly told me he was a direct descendant of the Clan McDonald.

"Because it was increasingly clear that many of us would finish up serving in the armed forces the school had started a cadet corps, and I was eventually promoted to be its first Sergeant-Major under a master, Captain Melluish.

"During school holidays we were allowed to visit our families in London (or elsewhere if they too had been evacuated).

"However by December 1943 the raids on London had largely stopped and the Bec Headmaster told us before we left for the Christmas holiday that there were now more Bec students living back home than he had evacuated boys remaining in Lewes.

"His suggestion was that we should all report back to school in Tooting at the start of 1944.

"Advice we all obeyed."

There is a 1995 book called "Lewes Remembers" full of memories of town residents who lived through the war.

Though there is a list of contributors at the front the



individual quotes are not attributed to identified persons.

This might well be because some of the memories are not always pleasant ones!

There is one particular observation concerning the various evacuees from London: "Long before the war, lots of Bermondsey boys used to come down to Lewes under a holiday scheme for children from deprived areas. Of course, when the war started, a lot of them had already been to Lewes so that's probably why they were evacuated to our town.

"We just absorbed them and got along fine.

"I mean, there was always the caste system you know, where the County Grammar School mob were always better than you, so you let them know they weren't quite.

"And with the Bec lot that used to be the same sort of situation with the Bermondsey boys."

Such schoolboy frictions apart, there's no denying that much goodwill was generated between the Bec and Lewes pupils and their respective teachers.

An editorial in the Grammar School's magazine, "The Barbican" highlights this: "December 1943 saw the return of the Bec School to London.

"They had been with us since the great evacuation of 1939, and our memories of the war will inevitably be linked with their sojourn in Lewes. For two schools to share the same buildings and attempt a full school life, with all the difficulties of war

**Above left: Bec School evacuee, Geoffrey Ellis. He stayed with Harold and Mary Pett in Lewes. Harold was a teacher at the town's County Grammar School prior to service in the Royal Navy. On the right we see London evacuees at an unknown location seven miles from Lewes.**

**Below: A recent Yarns featured a view of Southease railway halt in the Ouse Valley taken from a Luftwaffe bomber on 18th August 1940. This photograph was taken on the same day and shows the flight approaching Beachy Head. Inset is a Ministry of Information poster urging evacuation.**

thrown in, was as severe a test as could be devised.

"We shall always believe that we were fortunate in our guests and we take this last opportunity of paying tribute to the never-failing courtesy and co-operation of Mr. S. R. Gibson, Headmaster of Bec School, and his staff.

"We are very sorry that enemy attacks on London were renewed soon after their return.

"When we were darting under desks and listening to flying bombs roaring overhead, we could still spare a thought for their far worse plight in London where most of the missiles fell."

The Bec Boys are naturally featured in "The Fifty Five: A Story Set in

Stone", the new book that chronicles the two decades-long saga that culminated in the dedication in 1960 of the Memorial Chapel in what are now the grounds of Priory School, Lewes.

The building - a listed War Memorial - honours the memory of all the former pupils who lost their lives on active service in World War II.

The Tooting Bec School's own Roll of Honour of pupils who made the ultimate sacrifice includes the names of six young men who had been evacuees living in Lewes early in the war.

One of them, A. A. Green, is also commemorated on the Lewes Rugby Club memorial tablet at the Stanley Turner ground.

