INTRODUCTION

Ask a random group of people in the UK today what Christmas means to them and they'll probably mention – in no particular order – getting together with family, giving and receiving presents, having a couple of weeks off work, eating and drinking too much, spending the afternoon slumped in front of the television. A lot of them will groan, because getting together with family, shopping for food and deciding what to buy as presents are all, frankly, a bit of a nightmare. But they may well admit that they'd miss it if it didn't happen.

During the Second World War, the vast majority of people in Britain didn't have the opportunity to groan about Christmas. With husbands, fathers, brothers and friends away fighting, children evacuated to the country to

avoid the danger of bombing, and both men and women working in jobs that gave them very little leave, lengthy family gatherings were not an option. Many people were too poor to spend much on Christmas extravagances, even had there been anything much in the shops to buy; many were worried about the whereabouts of loved ones or grieving over their loss. Some of the lucky ones felt that it was wrong to celebrate when there was so much anxiety and sorrow about. With television broadcasts suspended from 1939 until 1946, the radio, or 'wireless', was the main source of news and entertainment; on Christmas Day, this meant church-like silence for the King's Speech. The King was George VI, whose crippling stutter was made famous for a new generation in the 2010 film starring Colin Firth; an extraordinary number of people who were children during the war recall how painful it was to listen to him struggling with his words. Apart from the wireless, listening to the gramophone, sing-songs round the piano or family games ranging from cards to charades were the best most people could hope for in the way of entertainment.

As for festive food, lots of things that we think of as commonplace were simply unseen from 1939 onwards. Signs reading 'Yes! We Have No Bananas' – the title of a popular song of the 1920s – were often seen outside greengrocers' shops, put there by shopkeepers who were tired of answering the same question over and over again. After the war, many children, seeing these strange bendy items for the first time, tried to eat them skin and all; one eight-year-old boy assumed they were guns. He and his friends may not have recognised exotic fruit,

but they knew what guns were and used the bananas to play war games until these strange new toys turned soft and squishy – which can't have taken very long.

The main reason for shortages like this was that, before the war, Britain imported about two-thirds of its food. This made the country immensely vulnerable to anything that interfered with supplies. From the moment hostilities started, German U-boats in the Atlantic targeted merchant ships coming from North America and elsewhere, hoping, effectively, to starve Britain out.

Rationing – a complicated system involving both coupons and points – of food and of lots of other things was introduced with the praiseworthy aim of eking out limited supplies and distributing them fairly to everyone. Understandably enough, the troops came first: civilians had to make sacrifices so that the men on the front line could carry on fighting. The government also encouraged people to eat healthily – a strong, well-fed nation would be better able to fight (and win) the war. Many, particularly the urban poor, had more nutritious diets than ever before as they were forced to cut down on fatty and sugary foods, and fill the gaps with vegetables. But although many in rural areas don't remember going hungry, many in the cities did. There simply wasn't enough to go round.

It goes without saying that fighting a war costs money. Another reason for shortages was a massive export drive – the more goods were sold abroad, the more funds came in to finance the war effort. Even things that weren't rationed quickly became hard to get, as anything that smacked of

frivolity gave way to practical needs. Shoe manufacturers concentrated on soldiers' boots and sturdy shoes for the Land Girls working on the farms. Raw materials that had previously been used to make toys were redirected into more essential work, and the factories that had produced them turned to assembling radar equipment or producing guns or tanks. Few people would have denied that these were more important in the circumstances than children's tea sets and teddy bears, but it made Christmas shopping difficult.

Alcohol was another luxury that all but disappeared. Apart from the odd glass of beer, only the privileged few were able to drink during the war. But then only the privileged few had been able to afford wine and spirits before the war. For most, drinking wine was not the everyday activity it is today, and of course wine was imported. Whisky didn't have to face the U-boats, but the government would allocate the necessary cereals to distillers only if a large part of their output was exported. As one government minister put it, 'The country needs food, dollars mean food, and whisky means dollars.' In other words, what whisky there was was sold to America.

One of the reasons that most people coped as well as they did was that they were 'all in it together'. However, particularly in the cities, a black market flourished: there were always those who could get round the system. Think of Private Walker in *Dad's Army* – someone who always knew where you could get hold of cigarettes, whisky, stockings or other desirable commodities. Some took a pragmatic approach to this, grateful to be able to acquire anything that was going, at a price, and no questions asked. Others

saw it as selfishness, and pretty discreditable selfishness at that. One person I spoke to while researching this book mentioned a brother who was in London during the war; he would have been in his twenties. There might have been any number of reasons why he wasn't in the forces – all sorts of 'reserved occupations' from teaching to working on the docks meant you were exempt from conscription – so I wasn't really thinking when I asked if he was in the army. 'Oh no,' his sister said. 'He wouldn't have done that. Not Jimmy.' Awkward pause from both of us. 'We weren't very proud of Jimmy.' Jimmy had obviously had ways and means of achieving his own ends – like Private Walker, deemed unfit for active service because he was allergic to corned beef. That excuse may be a comic exaggeration, but there were plenty who persuaded sympathetic doctors that they had flat feet, 'dicky' hearts or some other convenient medical condition. Clearly, more than seventy years on, Jimmy's sister was still ashamed that her brother hadn't done his bit. (He wasn't called Jimmy, by the way. Even after all this time, she didn't want me to name names.)

To revert to Christmas, although food rationing had not begun in 1939, petrol rationing had. The slogan 'Is your journey really necessary?' discouraged people from travelling even by rail. Hundreds of thousands of children had been evacuated and were spending Christmas away from their parents; and with all men aged between eighteen and forty-one obliged to register for military service (unless they were allergic to corned beef), many had been sent to France. Some shortages were already apparent and the blackout regulations

that forbade the showing of any lights after dark did away with the usual bright shop-window displays and the cheerful sight of other people's Christmas trees in their front rooms. Nevertheless, the government encouraged people as far as possible to celebrate as usual, suggesting that 'reasonable expenditure on Christmas festivities will help trade and lessen unemployment'. The Women's Institute urged its members to be inventive, not to abandon its traditional parties but to 'tie its Christmas sash a little tighter'.

By 1940, attitudes had changed. Food and any form of luxury were scarcer and, with the blitz at its height, Coventry in ruins, Swansea without drinking water and other major cities constantly bombarded, there seemed little to celebrate. It was to get worse. The nightly bombing abated after Russia entered the war in 1941 and the Germans had to fight on the Eastern Front as well as the Western, but shortages remained. For Christmas 1942, the British government imported 400,000 turkeys from Ireland – which didn't go far in a country with a population of over 48 million. One shop's entire supply was designated for the Merchant Navy, while another, which normally sold six or seven thousand turkeys in the run-up to Christmas, had only six hundred, reserved by regular customers weeks in advance. By 1943, according to the diarist Vere Hodgson, not even the 'despised rabbit' was available in some shops, never mind the more highly regarded poultry. A little mutton was the best that could be hoped for. Some shops had three Christmas puddings and eight hundred registered customers.

It was against this background that the people of Britain

spent the six wartime Christmases, from 1939 to 1944. And those Christmases are what this book is about. Much of what follows consists of interviews I conducted with friends, relations, neighbours and the parents, friends, relations and neighbours of friends – people, mostly now in their eighties or nineties, who were old enough to remember what it was like. The rest is gleaned from diaries and letters written at the time, and from published books. The youngest person I spoke to was seventy-six; the oldest was nearing her hundred-and-first birthday. Their experiences were very different: urban and rural; comfortably off and achingly poor; adults longing for loved ones to come back to them; children too young to be more than vaguely aware that anything out of the ordinary was going on. There is fear, anxiety, loneliness and boredom here; but there are also frequent flashes of humour and spirit, of kindliness, community and humanity. A book like this can't hope to be comprehensive; rather it is intended as a collection of snapshots or perhaps jigsaw pieces. Gathered and assembled almost at random, they still produce – I hope – an intriguing picture of a world that was in many ways warmer, less self-centred, more stoical than ours. Even if – or perhaps because – there was a war on.

CHAPTER 1

'A RUSH TO SAVE THE CHILDREN'

By the summer of 1939, it was apparent to almost everyone that the policy of appeasement had failed and that war was coming. Alongside its military plans, the government developed a strategy for keeping the nation's children safe. In the last days of August, in London and other cities, schoolchildren were instructed to bring in a case containing a change of clothes, enough food for a journey of several hours, and the gas masks that had been issued shortly before. At school, teachers fastened name tags to the children's jackets or hung labels round their necks, walked them in a crocodile to the nearest major railway station, then turned round, came back with the children and sent them home.

By no means every potential evacuee had this opportunity to rehearse. For many, the real thing – on Friday, 1 September, the day that Hitler invaded Poland – came as a bolt from the blue. Thanks to Operation Pied Piper, as it was called,

toddlers were separated from their parents for the first time, while elder siblings were instructed to hold tightly to their little brother or sister's hand so that members of the same family could stay together.

Two days later, at 11.15 on the morning of Sunday the 3rd, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain announced over the radio 'this country is at war with Germany'. By that time, hundreds of thousands of urban children – including many whose parents had privately taken or sent them away to friends or relatives – had been installed in new homes in rural areas. But 'foster' parents and the heads of schools that had taken in evacuees had no powers to keep children against their parents' wishes. Some evacuees stayed for a matter of weeks, drifting back home during the 'Phoney War' of late 1939 and early 1940, when people came to believe that the threat of bombing had been exaggerated and that the war would somehow just go away; others returned simply because parents wanted their children home or children were unbearably homesick. Still others were away for five years, seeing their parents only occasionally. For some this was the start of lifelong family friendships; for others it was a time of abject misery.

Some young evacuees even went to another continent – thousands to the United States and Canada, hundreds to Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. The King's Christmas message in 1940 referred to the breaking up of homes and families because of evacuation and to the generosity of 'the peoples of the Empire [who] have eagerly thrown open the doors of their homes to our children so

that they may be spared from the strain and danger of modern war'.

> But how many more children are there here who have been moved from their homes to safer quarters?
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> To all of them, at home and abroad, who are separated from their fathers and mothers, to their kind friends and hosts, and to all who love them, and to parents who will be lonely without them, from all in our dear island I wish every happiness that Christmas can bring. May the new year carry us towards victory and to happier Christmas days, when everyone will be at home together in the years to come.

It was to take a while.

In England, Jim was one of the lucky ones. At the age of twelve he was sent from south London to the village of Northiam in Sussex to stay in the home of a Mr and Mrs Skinner. Mr Skinner was the local milkman and did deliveries with a horse named Bunny pulling his cart:

> The days leading up to Christmas resulted in a hive of activity at Oak Cottage, an activity that I got fully involved in. Over the years, Mr Skinner had built up a private enterprise, selling oranges and nuts to his milk-round customers. Both the fruit and seed formed a natural contribution to the festivities. The crafty Mr Skinner had orders booked well in advance of purchasing his stock. The smell of oranges in a house, and the sight

of someone rinsing the nut fragments from their dental plate, were synonymous with the season. So with a couple of wooden crates full of oranges and sacks full of nuts it was my job to get the daily orders ready. Why oranges were always sold in sevens I will never know, nor will I know why coconuts were never included in bags of mixed nuts. When Mr Skinner loaded up his sideline on the milk cart each morning, Bunny got a little extra time to digest his tit-bits.

After my dad died in 1934, I cannot recollect too much about enjoying Christmas celebrations, but I am definitely able to call to mind the Christmas of 1939. Charles [the Skinners' eldest son] and his model-like lady came early on Christmas morning to spend the day with us. Before I tell of my fascination for his dolly bird, I must mention that they brought me a present actually wrapped in coloured paper. With excitement, I hastily opened it to find a large selection of Chinese puzzles. Those twisted metal rod things that can be difficult to separate until you discover the secret, and a better choice couldn't have been made… [There follows a rapturous description of Charles's glamorous girlfriend, who looked quite out of place in a small Sussex village.] When the five of us sat round the table for our delicious roast chicken dinner we must have represented the widest range of characters in Northiam. At teatime, when Mrs Skinner got out the cake, my memory went back a month earlier when I took the uncooked mixture, plus one penny, to the local bakers. The next

day I collected it, in addition to a Sharps toffee, and took home the perfectly baked cake to Mrs Skinner.

Some evacuees' experiences were eye-opening. Frank from the East End remembers:

I was evacuated, aged seven, to rural Buckinghamshire. I say 'rural' – it was only fifty miles from London, but that was a long way for a poor kid who had never been more than about a mile from home. I don't remember much about my first Christmas – the people I was staying with had two boys of their own and I didn't feel left out, so I must have had presents, but what they were I don't recall.

What I do remember is that on Boxing Day morning, I woke up to find that it had snowed in the night. Of course it snowed in London too, but I had never seen the world turned completely white before. In Bethnal Green snow turned to grubby slush within minutes; here it was soft and clean and brilliantly white in the morning sunshine. And everything was so quiet. Normally we heard the next-door farmer's horse and cart clopping along the lane, but today everything was muffled by this soft white cushion.

That winter – 1939–40 – was one of the coldest on record, and the snow lasted for weeks. Whenever I was feeling lonely or homesick, which I did sometimes, I just looked out the window at this magical world, or went out with the other boys and made snowmen. It

inevitably turned into a snowball fight, but that was something I'd never had in London either! And one morning I really thought that Santa's reindeer had paid us a visit, a bit late. My foster father laughed when he told me it was a local fox coming to see if it could raid the dustbins and leaving its delicate footprints in the snow.

John, too, eventually settled down to a happy time.

I was five when war broke out and went to Primrose Hill School in north London, but the whole school was evacuated to Maidenhead. Paddington station, platform 1, I remember it well. When we got there we were taken to what I later discovered was a school hall and then led out in groups of about ten. We went up the hill knocking on doors, looking for people who were willing to take us in. I now know that this happened all over the country, because hundreds of thousands of children were moved out of the cities in a mad rush, but for a long time it seemed extraordinary that they'd evacuated an entire infants' school without knowing where anyone was going to sleep that night.

Well, a woman did take me in but I hadn't been there more than a couple of months before I was knocked off my bike and broke my leg. I can remember being in hospital and being given an anaesthetic – a piece of gauze pressed over my face. I suppose it was chloroform. Anyway, I was in plaster from my toe to the top of my

thigh and when I got out of hospital the woman I'd been staying with wouldn't have me back. So I was sent to the local children's home for a while, and then the woman's mother got to hear about it and she took me in. She had a farm about five miles out of Maidenhead, and I stayed there very happily for five years. There were three daughters in the house and two other refugees – girls from another part of London – so it was very crowded, but they were kind to me and they did make an effort at Christmas.

Being on a farm, we always had plenty of eggs and vegetables, and they kept hens, which they sold for other people's Christmas dinners: I remember us children sitting round the kitchen table plucking them. We always had chicken for Christmas dinner ourselves, but not one of our own – having kept them all year, we couldn't face eating them; they were more like pets. So we must have bought or bartered for one from someone else. Out in the country there wasn't much of a black market, but there was plenty of bartering going on.

All the cooking was done on a range, with coal, and that's how they heated the water too. Bath night was Friday, in a tin bath in front of the fire, everyone using the same water one after another. There was a small bathroom in the house, with a bathtub, but that's where we kept the coal.

No hot-water bottles, so on winter nights we heated bricks in the oven, wrapped them in newspaper and took them to bed – just as they used to in the nineteenth

century. But then out in the country in the 1940s you were still pretty much in the nineteenth century.

We didn't have much in the way of presents, but I remember Christmas as a happy time. We made coloured chains from strips of sticky paper, and we cut out shapes that we hung up round the room, but it was very limited because everything was rationed. I remember a sort of soft peppermint sweet, made from flour and peppermint essence, which they must have saved from before the war – that was a real treat.

Mollie was another who was well looked after as an evacuee:

My brother and I were evacuated from London to a farm in Kent and we were very happy there. In fact, my brother – aged about ten – came home wanting to be a farmer. Back in London there seemed likely to be no meat for Christmas, so my stepmother entered a whole lot of raffles and ended up winning three chickens! They came with their feathers on and had to be plucked and drawn and their heads cut off. My stepmother, of Irish rural descent, did this without a blink, but my brother turned pale, left the room and never again mentioned a wish to be a farmer.

After the poverty of the East End, the country could seem very luxurious. Certainly it was a pleasant change not to be hungry all the time. There were other excitements, too, as Simon remembers:

> We had roast goose, roast potatoes, parsnips and Brussels sprouts, followed by Christmas pudding. We weren't used to eating so much, so after the main course we all felt we needed a break. By the time we were ready for pudding, it was getting dark and we had closed the curtains. Mrs Evans went into the kitchen to collect the pudding, which had been steaming away on the range all this time. Someone put the lights out, and I'll always remember that all I could see was a strange glow coming through the doorway. It was the flame of the brandy she had poured over the pudding and set light to. I'd never seen anything so eerie. My family was Jewish, so we didn't celebrate Christmas and I'd never heard of setting fire to a pudding before. Come to think of it, it was probably the last year for many years that the Evanses had any brandy to burn.

Grace, from a big family in the East End, had expected to be lonely when billeted with just one sister in the home of an elderly, childless couple:

> But they were rich beyond my wildest dreams – or so I thought when I was twelve. I'd never seen anything like their house: carpets, even in the hallway and on the stairs; sofas and armchairs with no stuffing pouring out of them; warm beds and a proper bathroom. At home, we'd had to go outside to the privy, which we shared with three other families. My sister and I woke up on Christmas morning expecting it to be like any other

day, only to find little pillowcases full of presents at the foot of our beds. Not only an apple and some nuts, but bright pink hair ribbons, pink hair grips in the shape of butterflies, and cotton handkerchiefs with our initials embroidered on them. Auntie Win, as we called our foster mother, had obviously been to a lot of trouble to make Christmas special for us – and even these little gifts were incredibly luxurious to girls who'd never had anything pretty before.

Audrey, too, had three very happy years as an evacuee:

I was privately evacuated, when I was nine, to my aunt and uncle in Dorset. At home in south London we shared air-raid shelters with our neighbours; I was in one and my parents were in another when a bomb dropped very close up and a fireman had to dig me out. After that, my mother thought I would be safer in the country.

My aunt and uncle had no children of their own and they treated me just like their own daughter and made sure I had a lovely Christmas, even though I was away from my parents. The thing I remember most clearly is my uncle going out into the garden and bringing in a huge tree and decorating it. He planted it in the garden every January and brought it indoors for a few weeks every December, but it must have been around for a good few years, because it was enormous.

Kay from Glasgow had a lucky escape, but still not a very happy time:

> Glasgow was very heavily bombed, with air raids night after night, and it was arranged that my sisters and I would be evacuated to an uncle in Canada. For some reason my father cancelled the arrangement just two days before the ship was due to sail – and that ship was torpedoed in the Atlantic, killing seventy-seven children.
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> But my parents still thought we would be safer away from Glasgow, so my older sister and I were sent to Lockerbie, where we stayed for a year in the home of the town clerk's wife. She wasn't cruel to us, but she didn't really want us. I can't blame her – she had two sons of her own – but she didn't treat us as part of the family. I remember that we had to do our own washing and I still have the mark of where I got my hand caught in the wringer. And we had our meals – including our Christmas dinner – downstairs with the maids.
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> I remember being very jealous of our younger sister, who got to stay home with Mum; the few times she came to visit she seemed to be dressed in pretty things, and by comparison I thought we were in rags. But the worst thing was hearing that there had been air raids at home and not knowing what had happened to our parents. We literally wouldn't know if they were alive or dead. It was very distressing for two small girls, aged about seven and nine.

For Millie, too, being in the country was a mixed blessing:

> Life in the farmhouse centred round the kitchen – the one room that was always warm. My bedroom was so cold in the winter that before I went to bed I used to lay out my clothes for the morning in the order that I would put them on: underwear, then blouse and skirt, then jumper, so that there was no frantic searching for clean knickers as I stood shivering in my pyjamas. The sooner I was dressed, the sooner I could get downstairs to the warmth of the kitchen range.
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> There was a room that my 'auntie', as I called her, referred to as 'the parlour', but it was kept for best and we children weren't normally allowed in. There was a proper fireplace, but we only had a fire there on special occasions. The only time I remember going in there was on Christmas Eve, when the vicar came round for a glass of sherry and we all had to sit quietly while the grown-ups talked. It was much more comfortable to be released back to the kitchen, where the Christmas tree was and where we were allowed to sit on the floor and play.

Arthur was miserable as an evacuee:

> I've never been as lonely as I was that first Christmas away from home. I wasn't used to a big family – the people I was billeted with had four children, all older than me, and on Christmas Day some neighbours or cousins or something came round, too. It felt as if there

were about twenty people in that little house – and at home, there were just my mum and dad and me. While we were waiting for dinner to be ready I went and sat at the bottom of the garden, and looked at the hens. It was freezing, but it was better than sitting indoors listening to all those people talking at once and knowing that I didn't belong.

My present from my parents was a jigsaw puzzle. It was one of the 'Victory' series and showed an Imperial Airways Empire Flying Boat, 'dissected', so that you could see what was going on inside. I sat on the floor and did it over and over again that Christmas, thinking about my parents and hoping that they were thinking of me. I don't know what happened to that jigsaw, but at the end of the war Victory brought out a 'Spitfires in Flight' puzzle and I have that in my attic to this day.

Others had far worse experiences than loneliness. A book of evacuees' memories published in the eighties contained a contribution from a man who, having written at length about his foster mother's cruelty at other times of the year, recorded what happened one Christmas:

On Christmas Day I had a clockwork tanker truck given to me. She let me wind up the lorry and as I removed the key she took the key and allowed the toy to run down. She refused to give me back the key. Remembering that I had lost keys to toys before and pushed cars backwards and released them, I did the same with the toy truck. It worked perfectly.

At this she called me a 'Damn young shit!' and hit me over the head with a chair. (I have the scar today.) By now it was 11 a.m., so she told me to fetch wood and stay out.

It was after dark when I was allowed back in the house. I was hurting with a large bump on my head and freezing with the cold. She then made me wash in cold water. Her daughter was given the lorry.

He was eight years old.

Brian, born in Surrey, was sent to Cornwall when his parents became worried about the bombing.

I was five when war broke out, so I do have some memories before then: I remember the taste of bananas and ice cream, two things we didn't see all the way through the war. Even once the war was over, if word got around that there was a shop or a van selling ice cream, you'd dash over there to find there was a queue half a mile long.

What triggered my parents' sending me away was a bomb falling nearby. I was sleeping downstairs, in my parents' bed, and the ceiling fell in. I'm told that I woke up and said, 'Was that a bomb, Daddy?' Dad said, 'Yes, go back to sleep', and I did. But in the morning I couldn't get out of bed – the bedclothes were covered in plaster dust and were too heavy for me to move.

So my parents sent me to a farm where we had been a couple of times on holiday, just outside Bude in Cornwall. I remember being lonely and homesick; I wrote grizzling letters asking to be allowed to come

home, but the farmer's wife must have censored them and assured my parents I was having a good time. I didn't see them for two years.

Nowadays, those memories come back to me almost as if in sepia, like pictures from Elizabethan England. I remember most of my time on the farm vividly. I experienced no cruelty. I was treated almost exactly the same way as the couple's own children (two boys – one a year older than me, one two years younger – and a girl older than all of us). Inexplicably, I never went to school. Instead I simply played around or worked on the farm, collecting hens' eggs every morning, hand-milking the cows, ploughing with a heavy horse, picking potatoes until my back nearly broke, helping with the harvest, etc. But the farmers were dirt poor. Although I collected the eggs every day, I don't think I ate one all the time I was there. They all had to be sold.

What I remember most of all is being hungry all the time: I pulled up carrots from the garden or went foraging for blackberries and nuts to get more to eat. I remember Kellogg's Puffed Wheat for breakfast, and for dinner rabbit stew featured large, with carrots and onions. I was the one who set traps for the rabbits, and I learned to gut them and even to whack them on the head to finish them off: quite an experience for a suburban lad who can't have been more than eight.

Miraculously I suffered nothing worse than malnutrition and, on looking back, I feel the experience actually enriched my life.

Although I have these clear memories, for some reason I have no recollection of Christmas on the farm. Maybe everyone was too poor even to celebrate it, although we went to church in Poughill every Sunday, travelling there and back by horse and cart, so I assume we went on Christmas Day too. It was on one of these journeys to church, in December, that I fell out of the cart and broke my arm.

I remember looking at my arm and seeing that my sleeve and the arm inside it were bent. It didn't hurt at all at the time – though it certainly did later. I was taken to the local cottage hospital, where they couldn't cope with me and sent me to Exeter. There, the first thing they did was stand me up in a bathtub and, of all things, give me an enema. Then I had a bath and they scrubbed me very thoroughly. I must have been very ragged and dirty; they were cleaning me inside and out before putting me in their nice white sheets. Then they proceeded to feed me up wonderfully – or so it seemed to me. Whether there were extra rations because it was Christmas, I don't know, but it was the first time for two years that I hadn't been hungry.

Brian was sent home after the accident, and he wasn't the only one. Keith, aged eight, was evacuated from Liverpool to North Wales, where he lived for a few weeks with a professor, his wife and two sons, in a house that was much more luxurious than his own, overlooking the Menai Strait:

it had a garden that seemed huge to me and there was a tree house. I had never seen one before and I loved it and was terrified of it at the same time. The professor's sons were a couple of years older than me and sometimes they would let me play in it and sometimes they wouldn't.

One day we'd been sent outside to play because the professor's wife was baking. I think she was making the Christmas cake; it was certainly a bitterly cold day, so it was quite late in the year. Anyway, we three boys were all in the tree house together and they suddenly seemed to change their minds about letting me join in. I could always tell when they were going to be mean to me, because they would start speaking Welsh, knowing that I didn't understand. Anyway, somehow or other I fell out of the tree house and broke my leg. I had some time in hospital but was sent home for Christmas and stayed there, so I spent the war in Liverpool after all. We weren't near the docks, so we were never actually bombed and I remember being more excited than scared at all the planes going overhead. I think I felt safer at home than I did in that tree house – and I'll never know if the professor's sons pushed me out.

Not all evacuation was carried out through Operation Pied Piper. Some parents simply chose to send or take their children away, in order to keep them safe. Brenda remembers:

That period of my life is a bit hazy to me. I was seven years old and, although war hadn't been declared,

my sister, brother [aged twelve and nine] and I were evacuated a week before 3 September 1939, away from the imminent bombing of London. It wasn't official: Mum took us to her birthplace in Aberdeen, because she didn't want us all to be separated and sent to different parts of the country. That might have happened, because we were at different schools, and whole schools were evacuated together.

The four of us moved in with my grandmother and my two unmarried aunts, Mum's sisters, while my father stayed working in London. My mother did all the cooking for the household, as both my aunts went out to work. She also did all the shopping and took our ration books with her. At that time I was the only one in the household who had a green ration book [issued to pregnant women, nursing mothers and small children], which entitled me to purchase bananas, when they were in the shops – which was hardly ever. I don't think we had a banana until after the war.

Mum worked very hard looking after us all and I remember one Christmas my big sister and I decided to bake a cake for her as a treat. Mum was out at the shops – queuing up for something, no doubt. We were so proud at how the cake turned out. When she came home and saw it, she was absolutely livid, as we had used up the whole of our ration of sugar for the week.

We didn't do much that was special at Christmas: this being Scotland, Hogmanay was the chosen time for celebration. We even had chicken on that day (our

once-a-year treat). I do remember making chains out of crepe paper, which I expect my brother then strung up for me; and the stockings on the mantelpiece which awaited the three of us and which contained an orange, an apple and some nuts.

We must have had other presents, though, because I remember vividly there was a strict rule about opening them: we weren't allowed to start until the adults were ready. On Christmas morning we were all in the living room except my auntie Minnie, who was great fun and always joking about something. We heard a clip-clopping noise from outside, and someone ringing a bell, mimicking the sound of departing reindeer. A moment later Auntie Minnie came in, looked out the window and said, 'Father Christmas has gone now.' Then we were allowed to open our presents.

Kathleen was four and living in Portsmouth, an important port, when war broke out. Shortly after her sixth birthday one of her much older brothers was killed in the Battle of Crete, a tragedy her parents didn't mention to her until the war was over four years later. Portsmouth was a frequent target of bombing raids, so Kathleen's mother arranged for her to be evacuated to the village of Swanmore, about fifteen miles away:

It wasn't a normal life, as my mother billeted me with a really lovely family while she came and went to Portsmouth: she still had her husband and one surviving son living in a shattered city, bombed day

and night. She stayed with me in our rented room from Monday to Friday as I was at school in Swanmore, but she left me in the care of the landlady Mrs Goff for the weekend. She did this for obvious reasons, I know now: if our small home in Portsmouth had been bombed, then at least one of the family would have lived on in peace in the Hampshire countryside.

Christmases came and went very frugally. There were no kitchen facilities in our one attic room – Mum cooked on an oil cooker – but those yellow powdered eggs I do remember, and fresh milk straight from the farm down the road. The best meal came from getting our wellington boots on and going out early in the morning for a bucket of mushrooms. Other than that, the clearest Christmas memory I have is looking out the window and seeing my next-door neighbour George riding his new bicycle down the road – it must have been a Christmas present and I just longed for one for myself.

Many years later, I moved to New Zealand, where I have lived ever since – and where Christmas is very different, with drinks on the lawn in the middle of summer, followed by a traditional turkey dinner later in the day when it's cool enough for people to want to eat it. At one time I attended a creative-writing class, run by a very accomplished lady who reminded me of Joyce Grenfell. She set us a lot of homework about wartime, with titles like 'What a Rotten Gift' and 'Not Sausages Again!' I particularly remember this poem I wrote – most of it genuine childhood memories, with

a bit of poetic licence. It shows that we did manage to make Christmas special, despite everything.

A Child's Memories of Christmas

Jingle Bells, mistletoe
Wading through the soft white snow
Faces wrapped in warm bright scarves
Coming home to a fireside glow.

Joining friends for carol singing
Gentle knocks on a stranger's door
'Away in a Manger' – 'Silent Night' –
Isn't it nice when they ask for more?

Pretending to sleep with one eye open
Watching the bedroom door
Will Santa in his long red robes
Leave my presents on the bedroom floor?

Christmas Day has dawned at last
There are presents at the end of the bed
A dolly, some books, a painting set
A dressing gown and slippers in matching red.

I can smell breakfast cooking so I'd better go down
Poor Mother's been baking all week
My brothers have built a huge snowman in the garden
Through my curtains I've had a quick peek.

This is the day we have friends round for dinner
A day most unlike any other
I wonder will Dad put a sixpence in the pudding
Especially for me to discover.

I've waited all year for this wonderful day,
The day we feel love for each other
But my brothers will chase me and tease me
And I'll run off and hide behind Mother.

One piece of poetic licence: I didn't get all those presents – they're there to make up the rhythm and the rhyme. I did get one dolly, though, which I named Vera, as the wireless had Vera Lynn singing all the time. I kept that doll for twenty years, but left her in the wardrobe when I moved to New Zealand. I have often regretted leaving Vera behind.

Betty, an older neighbour of Kathleen's, was evacuated from Portsmouth with her school. They moved to Salisbury in September 1939, and in November Betty's mother wrote to the headmistress asking permission for her daughter to come home for Christmas. Although the bombing of Portsmouth hadn't yet started, the headmistress was taking no risks and wrote a firm letter saying, 'You must accept full responsibility for having her home. You would need to send me a written statement to that effect with the exact dates.' Betty stayed at school, where a letter from the Lord Mayor of Portsmouth, addressed to all evacuated

children, wishing them well and hoping that they were grateful to those who had looked after them, would have given little comfort.

Keeping the family together was, understandably, a priority for many parents. Ronnie's mother held out against evacuation as long as she could:

> I was born in the East End of London, in Bromley-by-Bow, and wasn't quite three when war broke out. Most of the local kids were evacuated, but my mum wouldn't let us go – my dad was in the Merchant Navy and away all the time, so I guess she wanted to keep the rest of the family together as best she could.
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> Then when I was five we were down in the air-raid shelter when the block of flats we lived in was bombed. It was completely destroyed and left us with only the clothes we stood up in. And we hadn't had much to start with – we don't have many photos of that time, but there is one of me in a jumper so big it has had to be pinned together to stay on me. It's obviously handed down from someone much older who had grown out of it.
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> After the bombing we were sent to Rickmansworth in Hertfordshire, which was practically the countryside then – Rickmansworth was no more than a village. We stayed in a big house with a number of other families, and to us kids it was paradise, being outside all the time, scrumping for apples and looking for snakes – Rickmansworth was full of adders in those days. The