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**FRED SYMES**

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**WARTIME  
CHILDHOOD**

### MY EXPERIENCES AS AN EVACUEE

I was born in Portsmouth on the 13<sup>th</sup> April 1932 and was the fifth child out of a family of seven – five boys and two girls. My father worked in the dockyard as an electrician working on naval ships. He also belonged to the TA for 15 years. The house we lived in was semi-detached; we had all facilities – gas, electricity, running water, flush toilet, etc. but no bathroom.

Portsmouth was a city with a population of about 250,000, 25 cinemas and five theatres. We lived not far from the beaches at Southsea and Old Portsmouth where the dockyard was. The Royal Yacht was stationed there and of course Nelson's Victory with lots of naval ships in the harbour. The Naval barracks were close by plus Royal Marines. Naval ships from around the world called to pay their respects. If you walked along Commercial Road you could smell the tobacco from different countries. Somebody said there was a pub on every corner – not far wrong!! But the war took its toll.

Charles Dickens was also born in Portsmouth. My father took us to see the Royal Fleet reviews – a really amazing sight of Spithead – ships as far as the eye could see. I saw King George VI and Queen Elizabeth together with the princesses Elizabeth and Margaret. They were off to tour America and Canada in 1939 on the Royal Yacht.

We also went on a Sunday School trip to the Isle of Wight on a paddle steamer. My father took my eldest brother and myself by train to London to see the funeral of King George V in 1936. I sat on my father's shoulders as I was only four years old.

Came the fateful day the outbreak of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1939. We had been told at school what the arrangements were going to be for evacuees to report to school, then go to the Railway Station with our gas masks and also a small case with changes of clothes – 1 vest; 1 shirt with collar, 1 pair pants; 1 pullover or jersey; handkerchiefs; 2 pairs of socks; night attire' boots or shoes; comb; plimsolls; towel; soap; face flannel and toothbrush. We had a label tied to our coat with our names on. We were also given a packet of sandwiches and some cake. We boarded with great excitement, that is Victor, Edward and myself, being the youngest. Parents were everywhere looking very sad and upset. We had been guided on by helpers and teachers. The steam train was Southern Railway green and eventually left the station. The next question was where are we going to? The answer came: "You will know when we get there". It seemed to take all day. We eventually arrived in Fordingbridge, 45 miles from Portsmouth where the main party of children and teachers went on to Martin. My brothers and I were then sent to Ringwood where

we were dispersed. Edward and I went to Rockford in the New Forest, Victor was sent to another place about a mile away. We were very pleased and surprised to find ourselves on a farm with a large house and servants. The maid said I have to run a bath for you and when you are in bed I will bring you milk and chocolate. You can well imagine it was a child's paradise. The smell of the bracken and trees, wild ponies, geese, ducks, hens, pigs and cows. The owner, Miss George was a lovely lady. They also had three cars. We lived there quite happily for a couple of months until one day we were using a grub axe digging for worms for the hens, taking turns until my brother Victor wouldn't let me have my turn. I put my head down and the axe hit me on the head – blood everywhere. The doctor came and tried to give me an injection but I was crying and screaming so he couldn't get the injection in! He then advised Miss George as it was affecting her health, that we should be moved. Miss George promised Edward a pig which I will tell you more about later in my story. Her brother had been to Oxford University so she gave us some of his sporting equipment.

We moved not too far away to Mr and Mrs Waters who had a poultry farm. One Sunday they took us to his brother's farm at Ansty where they kept silver foxes in cages for their fur.

Mrs Waters was having a baby and we had to move again to Blashford where I went to some lovely people, Mr and Mrs Shutler, my brothers went to other houses. All the people were employed by the sand and gravel company. I remember going with my brother Edward to Blandford Camp with the lorry driver that he was billeted with. After a total of six months we were told that we would be moving to Martin to join the rest of our school.

#### **MARCH 1940**

Having moved to Martin we were billeted at the Bustard Cottages on John Baker's farm. I didn't stay long as my mother thought it unsuitable as the lady wasn't a well person. So she took me back to Portsmouth where I stayed about a month. The air raids had started and air battles were taking place. It was just after Dunkirk. I came back to Martin and Bustard Cottages where Mrs Williams and her son, Charlie, took me in to join my two brothers, Victor and Edward. The first thing I noticed were paraffin reading lamps, candles, etc. The radio was powered by an accumulator which was charged regularly, no running water. We would sit around the radio listening to the news on the Home programme. There was very little heating just a kitchen range. We would have a bath once a week in a bungalow bath. Otherwise strip washes in winter – brrrr!! This was quite normal for Martin and probably the

same for hundreds of villages. Electricity was available but not many houses had it. A lot of farms did have it supplied. Electricity supplies came in about 1937.

Mrs Williams was a nice lady, quite strict, having three boys and later my brother, Brian. She seemed almost as wide as she was tall with about three chins and when she laughed everything shook and tears would roll. She was a generous person. One day she said I am going shopping to Salisbury and I have left dinner and pudding, a jam tart each made of flour and water (no fat) on an 8" plate. It was like eating a hard tack biscuit. The same went for dumplings for stew; we called them cannon balls. One day she made soup, it was the most foul tasting but because I was hungry I ate mine. My brother feigned not feeling well and she said to me you have eaten yours now you can eat Edward's! Some of the meat supplied was awful from Bennetts of Fordingbridge. I chewed and chewed with no impression. Charlie found out that they were supplying donkey meat – it was a good job we had rabbits and game, etc.

One dark night neighbours called out "Come and have a look". We went out and could hear the bombs dropping and the guns firing, see the searchlights also flames soaring in the sky over Southampton. All this from Bustard Cottages.

I was talking to my two brothers when along came the vicar, Rev. Skillbeck-Smith who suffered a very hard time on the western front and was awarded the MC and still suffered after effects with his nerves. He said to us "Have you boys seen my horses"? "What horses"? "My daughter's horses – I am fed up looking for them. If you see them get up on their backs and ride the buggers until they drop"!!

Coming to Martin when I was eight years old opened my eyes. The village seemed very laid back as all villages were at that time. Horses were still used but there were old tractors as well. The huge amount of countryside around, trees, rivers, birds in abundance – it became our unofficial playground. I also collected 60 birds' eggs up on the downs; the larks soaring singing in the sky. In short a childrens' paradise with masses of wild flowers, bustard pond frogs, etc. Bokerly Dyke the huge earthworks. The other thing we noticed was the way people spoke "where bidst gyane snow you" "How bist lack you where hast been. It was spoken in a rich accent or brogue with a Hampshire/Wiltshire/Dorset dialect. But what characters – they had tremendous knowledge of the countryside. We had great freedom to move about as long as we obeyed the rules of the land.

On starting school in Blandford Hall, we found out that there were 21 children and three teachers. We joined them at Easter 1940, some 24 of us from Ringwood area

making 45 children. Quite a few others had gone home to Portsmouth as some were 14 years old. We didn't realise at the time that we were having a progressive education under our headmaster, Mr Jordan, who had long held these thoughts and who could put his ideas into practice. Apart from maths, English, history, geography, nature study, music, religion, art, handiwork such as basketry, sewing, knitting and rugmaking, we went out walking to get practical experience of our surroundings having to do nature studies, drawing flora and fauna and writing about them. The same with history, we would go out measuring and logging houses, farms, etc and a lot were 18<sup>th</sup> century, then writing about them. The farmers and householders were always very co-operative. We had allotments behind the village school where we learned about digging and planting crops. The senior boys worked on their's by Mr Main's orchard opposite Bennetts Cottage. Produce was then sold to raise funds for the school.

From Blandford Hall our headmaster, Mr Jordan, took us in 1941 for a day trip on the Martin flyer to Cheddar Caves, Wookey Hole and Wells Cathedral as part of our education. The money was raised by the school through our garden produce, handicrafts and the school pantomime. A wonderful trip. Before my brothers and I joined the other children in Martin, They were taken to visit Stonehenge and Salisbury Cathedral and Old Sarum – quite a history lesson. I can honestly say that most children were excited by events in wartime - if there was a whiff of the military about the children would find them. Another thing we witnessed were the Wilton Hunt meets outside of the Manor and the hunt in full flight with the horn sounded by Tim Tilbrook who later became steward of Martin Club. At this point I would like to explain what Martin was like – so different from today. Lots of small fields, thick hedges, trees and farms were all labour intensive.

Starting at Martin Drove end, Ted Bath owned the Coote Arms and a small farm there. Also on the otherside Mr J Shering had a small farm. Moving down to Martin the first place we came to was the British Legion and Working Mens Club. Mr Lewington was the steward. On the same side the next place was a half finished house where the Burr family moved into eventually he was the Labour Exchange Manager. Next a bungalow with Mr Chequer White who had a few acres opposite and was a preacher at the chapel. The chapel was next and on each side there were very tiny cottages which later were condemned. One of them was one room above the other – it was said that it was one of the smallest houses in England. On the left hand side opposite Townsend Lane was Mr Bennett's farm. From Townsend Lane to the first thatched cottage was a field where in 1944 there were houses built by the council for families. Next to Mr Bennetts house were two very small houses and Mr

George Messer, the gamekeeper for the Beveridge Estate, lived there. Moving down, the next bungalow (which is now converted) Mr Tom Pearce lived there and he had a grey mare which he rode. The Francis house next door – Mr Francis would buy old horses and cows and cut them up for cat and dog meat. Next door Mr and Mrs Willis lived. They had come down from London where he had a cycle shop and he carried on doing repairs. He was quite a character. Next was the Manor where the Douse and Smith families were living. Mr Douse was the watchman I believe it belonged to the Street family. On the other side of Broad Lane was the farm of Jimmy Curtis where you could buy skimmed milk for a penny a pint. Next was the farm of Mr and Mrs Chappell. Opposite were Mr and Mrs D Main of Lime Tree Farm, on one side of which was the blacksmith's forge where Mr Charles Percy from Damerham carried out his work. On the other side of Lime Tree Farm was a tennis court and orchard and further down by the shop his farmyard. Next to Mr Chappell's farm lived Mr and Mrs Kent who had owned the Mill House at Bishopstone. Next door to Bennetts cottage which was taken over by the authorities for the purpose of housing an evacuee family.

The Symes family were very lucky. My mother who had gone through a lot of bombing in Portsmouth had had enough and moved up with my eldest and youngest sister who was eight months old. They obtained rooms at first next door in Mrs Kent's. That weekend my father came up to see us at Mrs Williams where my youngest brother, Brian, had joined us. Then we all came to view Bennetts cottage. It was a lovely day and we were all excited. We then walked my father to the Coote Arms to see him off on the bus to go to Salisbury to catch the train to Portsmouth. We waved him off. He got to Portsmouth and there was a raid in progress. He decided to carry on to the station where he had to go to the dockyard on duty with the home guard. He had just got off the train when a parachute mine came down and he was killed. In total 28 people died. My father is buried in Martin churchyard – 27.11.1941. We all moved with my mother into Bennetts Cottage and we stayed there for 12 years until we moved into a house in Townsend Lane. My mother moved from Martin in 1992.

Next door is Priest House where Captain and Mrs Kaulback lived. He became a war hero. I have his citation and obituary where he ended up as a Colonel of the Yorks and Lancs Regt. Opposite was Mr Main's cottage where Mrs Barry the billeting officer was staying. Opposite Bennetts Cottage was Pilgrims Cottage. Mr Easter lived there followed by the Melsom family. Next door Fred Hacker and his wife, Winnie, ran the shop. They seemed to be the entertainments couple of the village running whist drives, shows, beetle drives and dancing. They did a wonderful job. They

started off their business in Packbridge cottage where Lady Whitelegge lived. After that coming to Martin Cross and of course the village pump. Moving up Sillens Lane, Reg White's farm. Next to him Raymond Fisons holding. At the top of the lane by the downs was a poultry farm run by Benny Melsome and his son Joe. Back to the cross opposite Whites farm is White Hart House where Mr and Mrs Kerly lived on one side, Mrs Flemington lived in the other. It was formally the White Hart Inn. This is where the Martin bus was housed. The Martin Flyer was a 28 seater driven by Maurice Flemington, the son. I have been on the bus when 52 people were crammed on. Phew!!! Along opposite George Poore's home was the Blandford Hall which became the evacuees' school for about 3-4 year olds. The remainder of the evacuees, about 13 of us, transferred to the village school. Next to that was Bill Read's house, the council lengthsmen. Opposite were Church Lane and the church and the village school where our teachers, Mrs. Prydderch and Miss Saunders taught us until Miss Gould took over as head teacher. Opposite the school Mrs Scammell ran her little shop – sweets, lemonade, etc. more like a tuck shop. Next to the school was Mr Barter's farm and opposite is one of the oldest houses in Martin. The Sellwood Brothers lived there and later Des Kerly and his wife. The next house is where the Poole family lived, Mr and Mrs Poole and daughter Susan. Mr Poole had been in the Colonial Service as a district commissioner in Africa. He wrote an earlier history of Martin – very interesting. Opposite was Bill Sellwood's farm. The next building was Mrs Read's house and shop with post office incorporated and run by Miss Mason. Down further on the right the Poore family lived and ran their threshing business with a steam engine working the thresher. Up the small lane there were two old cottages, one was lived in by the Jeans family. The other was used by a jam making group who were extremely busy when there was plenty of fruit about. Next to the small lane was a threshing business run by the Dibden family with their steam engine and very exciting for children to watch.

The Maurice Flemington family lived in the last house at the back on the right. On the left was St George's cottages where Mr Ings did taxi work. By Bustard Corner was the cottage of Lady Whitelegg. Then round the corner was Bustard Manor, the first property on your right which originally had been lived in by a religious order of monks who apparently left in the 1920's. Mr John Barker and Jill bought the farm. Going up Paradise Road you come to the Bustard Cottages which housed the farm workers. We were placed with Mrs Williams and Charlie here. Back to East Martin the next house was where Mr Brown the haulier lived. Across the road where Mr and Mrs E Flemington lived they had a small holding. Up the lane adjacent was the vicarage where the Revd. Skillbeck-Smith lived. Going further up is Talks Farm which

was run by Jim Taylor and his sister Ethel. The farm cottages opposite were where the Cox family lived. He cut our hair, also Mr Marlow and Eddie Perry – did short back and sides. Carrying on up the road you come to David Shering's poultry farm. Next on your left was the farm of Captain Rhodes who in the first war was badly wounded and used a shooting stick thereafter. Making our way to Tidpit we come to Mr J Woodvine's farm. Opposite is where Bert Ambrose the gamekeeper lived. Across the road the village policeman, PC Stone lived, later the house of Mrs Hibbard JP. The Blandford Hall was given to Martin by her father. Going towards Damerham was the farm of Mr Charles White. At Allenford opposite in the meadows was where trout were trapped in the River Allen and were cut off in a pond. It was a very hot summer in Woodvines Meadows and the trout had to be rescued. At the same time in Lower Allenford pond by Knoll Farm there were hundreds of trout dying due to lack of oxygen.

As the war progressed Grimsditch Camp was built firstly occupied by a British Anti Tank Regt. Then it became an American hospital ready for DDay. The army set up a searchlight unit on Toyd Down below Windmill Hill. There was another one on top of Coombe Hill and one in West Harnham as well as Cranborne. Then the rifle range by Bockerly Ditch was built. At the top of Small Lane to the left called Hannam Down the American Army built an assault course which they used and the Home Guard also. On the way to Damerham just over Allenford Bridge firstly the British had an ammunition dump the golf links and under trees bordering a field opposite Knoll Farm other munitions were stored. There was an accident causing a huge explosion and four soldiers were killed. Martin shook with the blast. We were in school at the time. The Americans took over firstly a white unit then a black unit where they had an accident handling phosphorous shells in the golf links. We would talk to soldiers guarding the dump. When it was cold they had a brazier just over Allenford Bridge to keep warm but it was extinguished at night. The British first then the Americans lived in West Park. They also had built accommodation just at the start of Damerham. There were Americans in Fordingbridge. Also General Patton's headquarters were housed in the Breamore Estate. Farther out to the east 10-15 miles was Ibsley and Stoney Cross Air Fields. A bombing range in the forest. Going south there was also a bombing range at Critchall Down and at Tarrant Rushton airfield where the 6<sup>th</sup> airborne Troops of Ox and Bucks Battalion took off in six planes towing gliders for Pegasus Bridge on DDay. Three gliders landed with great precision to land close to the bridge by the side of the canal. There was an American hospital at Blandford Camp, Grimsditch, Harnham and Odstock. To the north were Old Sarum, Boscombe Down and Middle Wallop airfields which were Battle of Britain stations. Martin was