



The Evacuees



Brown Rigg and the Blitz

The first occupants of the newly-constructed Brown Rigg Camp were schoolchildren, evacuated from Newcastle when air raids began following the declaration of war. The first intake arrived in 1939 and some were to spend the entire wartime period in the North Tyne Valley. The conditions they found were somewhat spartan, their accommodation was in wooden huts with bare floorboards. They slept in cast iron two-tier bunk beds; toilet and washing facilities meant a trek across to the ablution block in all weathers.

The children were billeted in five dormitories: Stephenson, Collingwood, Grainger, Charlton and Blackett. These were presided over by the formidable Miss Isobel Marks, the Headmistress of the Newcastle Church High School for Girls, the entire school having decamped to Bellingham. They were joined by girls from other Newcastle schools, and pretty soon the school was full to overflowing.

Despite the ravages of war there was an air of normality at Brown Rigg. Lessons were taken as normal in the classrooms, and in the evening activities were organised. Despite shortages and rationing, the children were well fed with three meals a day plus supper in the evening. The school had a large vegetable garden and grew a lot of its own produce. With all the fresh air the children had extremely healthy appetites and nothing was left, indeed there was often a rush for second helpings especially for favourites such as 'Spotted Dick', although for some reason tapioca was never that popular. The school diet was supplemented by eagerly-awaited food parcels from home and there was always excitement when one arrived, especially as wartime rationing meant things like sweets were extremely hard to get. One girl remembers the great excitement when a parcel arrived containing a jar of jam, which was shared out with each girl getting a spoonful!



Without today's distractions such as televisions and iPods the children were encouraged to make their own entertainment, and there were many evenings spent enjoying a sing-song round the piano led by the music teacher Miss Sweeting, while the drama teacher Miss Wilson had them performing in numerous plays including a memorable performance of Peter Pan. One former evacuee, Jean Edmondson, recalls, "I was in Collingwood and we had to put on a show for the whole camp, every four weeks you had to devise your own acts and I tried to learn tap and ballet. It was very competitive and you got marks for your performance".

Brown Rigg only experienced one wartime air raid which saw the girls spend a cold and miserable night in the brick shelters behind the dormitories huddled in blankets and clutching their favourite dolls. These were particularly precious, as new ones were totally unobtainable in wartime and the school's boiler man, known affectionately as 'Old Ned', was much in demand replacing missing arms and legs from a stock of assorted pieces he kept in his shed.