

David's Story

Evacuation during World War II

David is a long-serving and dedicated volunteer at St Paul's Cathedral who is a trained guide and school facilitator. David and his family were evacuated from London during World War II for a short time before returning to London and living their lives under the shadow of the Blitz. He shares his personal story with us in the hope that we can share it with others and can learn from his experience. Please read **David's Story** and use it to help you complete the activities that follow.



David Speaking to Yr. 6 - Cathedral at War Workshop – St Paul's Cathedral - 2019

David is kind enough to share his story with visiting schools when he is able to, so perhaps next time you visit St Paul's Cathedral you might meet David too.

How old were you when World War II broke out and what happened to you and your family?

"When war broke out in 1939 I was just 5 years old and had recently started school. My family, who lived in Fulham, in South West London, included myself, mother and father, an older sister and a brother 2 years younger than myself.

The government of the day had decided that all children should be evacuated (sent away) from the big cities such as London, Manchester and Liverpool, to avoid the expected bombing by German aircraft. The usual situation was that whole schools and their staff would move to a school and accommodation in the countryside as a group. However, as my brother hadn't started school, we were sent off as a whole family (except for father who was in the Royal Air Force).

As a youngster I had no idea what was happening or where we were going but we all got onto a special train at Putney Bridge and ended up in the city of Guildford in Surrey, about 30 miles from London. Along with all the other people on the train we lined up after we arrived and were eventually selected to go and live in the house of an elderly lady who occupied only part of the house."

How did it feel to be an evacuee?

"Being an evacuee did not feel at all strange as there were many others in the same situation and we fitted in quite quickly – it was a bit of an adventure really. We were enrolled in the local school which had a primary section and separate boys' and girls' secondary sections. We always walked the 15 or 20 minutes to school carrying our gas masks which were needed whenever you left the house. Guildford was on the route to London for the Luftwaffe and did get some bombings. There were two obvious targets for bombs in Guildford, one was the main railway line connecting London to Portsmouth (the major naval base on the south coast), the other was the Dennis Motor Company, well known for building buses and other big commercial vehicles, and in those days, military vehicles. School lessons were interrupted from time to time by the air raid siren, which meant that we all had to get out of the building and go down the road 200 metres to the school shelters which were damp, gloomy tunnels built into the old local quarry. Once there we all sat waiting for the all-clear siren to sound before making our way back to school."

What had changed about ordinary life and what was London like during the Blitz?

"Generally life was not too bad - we had a big park about a five minute walk from the house and I had joined the local scout group. Cinemas were the occasional treat and we had cards and board games at home. No television at all in those days; no computers, no mobile phones, and with petrol on ration, almost no private cars. Any evening outing was rare

because of the blackout which meant we had no or very few street lights at night, and a small torch was very useful to find your way around.

Then, part way through the war, tragedy struck with the death of our mother. This meant that us three children were left on our own without a parent and were due to go into a children's home somewhere. The situation was solved by an aunt and uncle with two daughters a little older than ourselves who lived in Kensington in London, and who offered the three of us a new home: thus I gained two further sisters!

Kensington was quite a different situation from Guildford with very regular air raids, bomb damaged areas a common sight and, on the ground floor of our new school, something we had never seen before – a gas cleansing station. This was equipped with everything necessary for people to be treated for the effects of gas attacks.

Food rationing, blackouts, gas masks, and identity cards were common to both Guildford and London. Life was difficult and scary at times but it had its compensations...

One big plus were all the bomb damaged sites which we could get into and use as playgrounds and nobody worried about damaging anything as it had already been damaged anyway! We children had a great play area in Kensington since the four houses next to us on one side were all empty and we could get access to them and the gardens across the dividing walls. What we did lack, however, were facilities in the home - it was lit by gaslights and had only one water tap, water having to be heated on the gas stove or the kitchen range. There was no bathroom and the only toilet was outside in the garden. It was at this time that I first got involved with the church as I became a server at the High Anglican church attached to the school where we had a church service every Thursday morning, and this led to a similar situation at our local church where I was a server and later a treble in the choir.

It was later in the war that London became the target for guided weapons, firstly by flying bombs often referred to as V1s, buzz bombs or doodlebugs, which you could see flying over with their familiar engine noise. Safe if the engine was still going. If it stopped then dive for cover as it was about to crash and explode. Perhaps more frightening were the next guided weapons, the V2 rockets, which travelled faster than sound and just fell to earth and exploded. The first one to fall on London fell close to us one night at Chiswick, creating a huge explosion and an enormous amount of death and damage.

War in Europe came to an end in 1945 amongst great relief and rejoicing. At long last we could sleep at night without any worries about the house being hit or damaged and falling on top of us. Although we still had rationing until the 1950s and shortages of everything, life was to slowly get back to normal."

How did it feel when war was over and what did you do when you grew up?

"In 1946 I went to a Grammar school in Chelsea and spent five years there. Although not a brilliant pupil I had a good and solid education which had quite an impact on later life.

Following school I worked for two years for the travel company Thomas Cook at their HQ in Piccadilly in London.

Then in 1952, like all males in those days, I had to do military service. I joined the RAF for three years as a regular and was able to choose a technical training course in airborne radar systems. I spent some time at RAF stations in Britain before being sent to Germany which was under occupation by the four allied powers. I spent most of my time there at an RAF station just outside Cologne Cathedral.

My time in Germany taught me an awful amount, particularly about how the German people had suffered just like ourselves, and I was particularly saddened by the amount of damage there had been in the war due to bombing. I had initially expected hostility towards their former enemy. Instead I found the majority of the Germans I met were extremely friendly, and after learning some German I could mix more freely with people, and was a regular visitor to the skating rink in Cologne.

This experience showed me that most people on both sides of a war could be thoroughly decent, whilst maybe holding different beliefs or ideas and that it is the politicians who start wars. The formation of the European Union showed how we could all live together in peace, and the ability for more travel after the war changed people's thinking of each other.

My great ambition had always been to go to Canada as I had been writing letters to a Canadian girl since 1944 whilst the war was still in progress. But travel to Canada in my days was almost impossible except for the wealthy, and finding employment from Britain and immigration were rare. My Canadian girlfriend sadly married a local boy but we did keep in touch until she died in 1999. I did eventually get to Canada and stayed with her and her family, so have some very happy memories, and she gave me a love of Canada which I have to this day."

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Activities

Activity 1:

Reflect on *David's Story* by thinking about the questions below:

1. What do you think was the hardest part of David's experience?
2. How do you think David felt going back to London to another, different home?
3. What do you think it would have felt like to live in London during the Blitz?

Activity 2:

David's isn't the only evacuee story connected to St Paul's Cathedral. The St Paul's Cathedral School, where many of the students were Choristers, were evacuated to Truro in Cornwall during the war, where they continued sharing their music and voices.

Think about 3 questions you would like to ask David or the Choristers about wartime Britain if you had the chance. Write them below:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Use the links below to read about other people's experiences of evacuation during World War II and see if they can help you answer any of your questions.

[Singing at St Paul's By Wilfred E Small](#) – WW2 People's War

[War through the eyes of a child: Plymouth Blitz By Derek Dawes](#) - WW2 People's War

Activity 3:

Write a letter to David and tell him what you learnt from his story. Use the template provided on the last page to help you.

Send it to learning@stpaulscathedral.org.uk or Schools & Family Learning, St Paul's Cathedral, The Chapter House, St Paul's Churchyard, London, EC4M 8AD or share it with us on Twitter @stpaulsedu and we will share your letters with David.

Copy Right: WW2 People's War is an online archive of wartime memories contributed by members of the public and gathered by the BBC. The archive can be found at bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar

Reflect

After you have finished all of your activities, sit quietly for a few seconds. Think carefully about some of the people in the world that are still living in conflict, war and danger. Think about those who are currently separated from their families and friends. Think about how daily life for refugees and others is being affected by separation, like the separation evacuees witnessed in World War II. In your moment of quiet think about peace and how you will bring peace to your community and to the world.

List three ways you will work for peace for your community:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Fill in your details and write a letter to David

[illegible]

Yours Sincerely,