

## Evacuated to Quorn 1941

In March 1941 thirty-seven children arrived at Quorn railway station with their schoolteacher, from Hove on the south coast. They had been evacuated to protect them in the case of a German invasion.

In 2021 eighty-six year old Jackie Lee was looking at the display of new heritage boards in the Community Room of the Old Primary School, when amazingly she recognised herself and her sister Heather in a photograph of Quorn evacuees!



Jackie (left) and Heather

Jackie, then known as Bessie Pearce, tells her story:

### Before the war

I was born in 1935, just over four years before the war started. My name then was Bessie Jacqueline Pearce. I lived in Brighton with my parents and sister Heather, who was nearly two years older than me.

Our family never had a lot of money, but I had a happy homelife. I remember often on Sundays when my father was home we would go down to the seafront for a treat.

In Brighton there are three levels of promenades; the top level with all the hotels, about forty steps down to the second level where we walked along and descended another 40 steps to the beach level. Here there was a children's playground. Sometimes we went on the Volk's Electric Railway to the Palace Pier and thought it was great fun to be walking over the sea.

### The war begins

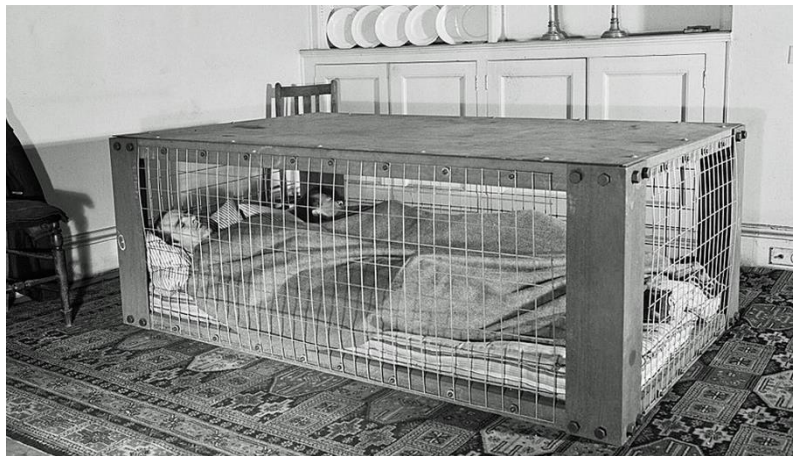
When war was declared on 1<sup>st</sup> September 1939 I had only been at school for a few months and I now had a baby brother.

There were no more trips to the beach, the playground or the pier. Everything had been cordoned off on the top promenade with large notices and big coils of barbed wire and we had to carry our gas masks around at all times.



The Pearces just before the war. Left to right Heather, Rose with the baby, Bessie (Jackie).

After a while we all moved to my aunt's house on the outskirts of Hove. She had a large house and in one room there was large Morrison Shelter. This looked like a very big caged bed, made of iron with a thick roof. Inside were lots of cushions and covers, and when the air raid siren went off, there was enough room for my aunt, my parents and us three children. I can't remember any actual bombing, but I can remember being frightened by the sound of the fighter planes going over and the noise of the 'dog fights' overhead. When I went for walks with my father we would see crashed planes on the hillside.



Example of a Morrison shelter

At school we all had to practise putting our gas masks on and I can remember the dreadful rubbery smell today. Without warning the headmistress would sound the

alarm bell, at which point we would have to put on our masks and practise running to the air raid shelter that was built in the playing field.

### Leaving Hove, March 1941

One day when my sister and I got ready for school we were told to put on our best hats and coats and we were each given a small case with some of our things inside. We also had to carry our gas mask, which was in a box tied with a string, over our shoulder.

When we arrived at school we all went into the main hall with our parents. As well as our cases and gas masks, a large label with our name on it was tied to our coats. We were told that we were going for a holiday in the country, that our parents couldn't come, but we would be accompanied by a teacher. We were very excited at the thought of a holiday and had no idea that it would mean being away from our homes for so long.

When we got on the train a teacher and a nurse from Hove looked after us. I remember crying and holding my sister's hand very tight. We had never been away from our parents before. I was six years old and Heather was seven and a half.



Not long before leaving for Quorn.  
Left to right, Heather, baby brother, Rose, Bessie (Jackie).

### Arriving in Quorn

The train took us to Quorn, probably via Leicester. When we got off the train there was a small crowd of people waiting for us. They had been given the names of children who they would be taking back to live with them. They checked our labels and gradually we were all on our way to our new homes. I was lucky as my sister and I were kept together. Some siblings were split up and there was a lot of crying. We were taken by a Mrs Holmes, who lived in a large house which is now 91 Chaveney Road, with her husband, thirteen year old son Oliver and either a housekeeper or 'daily'.

### School life

Our new school was fine and we were happy there. We kept our teacher from Hove and I have found out since that we were taught in the old school room at the back of what was then the Quorn Methodist Chapel on High Street. Our teacher was very kind and made a great effort to give us good times. We were taken out a lot and I can remember going on rambles and picnics, usually made up of jam sandwiches and pop. We quite often went to the same place, but we didn't mind because we were enjoying ourselves.



In Quorn near the railway. Heather and Bessie are either side of the girl in the middle (with the hat).



I also remember knitting dishcloths in class and I was pleased that my mum had taught me to knit.

### Difficult times

Sadly we were not happy in our new home. Mrs Holmes was very strict, also her son Oliver teased and tormented us a lot. When we were playing in the garden he would chase us with beetles, spiders or snails and threaten to put them down our jumpers. This would make us cry and scream, and Mrs Holmes would tell us off. Sometimes he would come into our bedroom at night when it was dark and make ghostly noises. We screamed with fright and got another telling off from Mrs Holmes.

When we arrived we were asked what we liked for breakfast and we said porridge; remembering the way our mum made it, lovely and milky. The porridge we were served was made with water and very thick, which I hated. My sister tried her best to get me to eat it because she knew that if we didn't, it would be served up for our tea, cold with a blob of jam. If we still didn't eat it, things were kept from us. We didn't get any sweets because these needed ration coupons and Mrs Holmes kept our ration books, but our mum would use her ration to send us chocolate in with her letters. Because I didn't eat my porridge, I didn't get my mum's chocolate. When I cried about this, Mrs Holmes got very cross and we were sent to bed without time to play.

We were never treated as part of the family and all our meals were eaten in the kitchen, not with Mr and Mrs Holmes and their son. What we missed most though was our mum. No kiss at bedtime, no cuddles when we were upset and no-one to run to when we were frightened.

Very few people had phones at home, so we never spoke to our parents and teachers couldn't phone homes either. All contact was by letter and because of the war there were fewer mail trains, so even letters could get delayed.



The photograph above was provided by another Hove evacuee, Robert Hudson in 2017, and shows a group of evacuees at haymaking time in 1941 in the fields off Buddon Lane, near the railway line.

This was used on the WW2 heritage board in Quorn Old School and was where Jackie spotted her and her sister in August 2021.

Jackie's sister Heather Pearce is first on the left on the front row and Jackie (then Bessie Pearce) is third from the left. Evacuated at the same time were near neighbours, John and Betty Powell, who were also cousins of Robert Hudson. John Powell is fifth from the left on the bottom row (kneeling with straw in front of his face) and Betty Powell is second from the right on the back row.

Robert Hudson is first on the left on the back row and next to him is his best friend Peter Billingham.



91 Chaveney Road  
Photograph courtesy of Google Street

Sometimes at school we were allowed to write to our parents. All the letters were put into one large envelope and presumably sent to our old school for our parents to pick up. I couldn't write very well at that time, so I just drew pictures and put my name on the top, but my sister Heather could. She wrote telling mum how unhappy we were and 'how horrid' the people were at the house. She mentioned the incident about the porridge and that we didn't get any of the sweets and chocolate she sent.

Unbeknown to us the teacher and nurse had read Heather's letter and set about finding us a new place to live, although it took quite some time. My parents had been very upset when they got Heather's letter, even though the nurse wrote and said they were finding us a new place to live. Many years later when I had to clear my mum's house, I found she had kept my sister's letter and was able to read it for myself. I can only imagine how she must have felt.

### **Happy endings!**

One day the nurse came to the Holmes' house and took us away. It was only a short walk to our new home with a Mr and Mrs Taylor. My sister can remember then standing waiting for us at the iron gate to their house with smiles on their faces and open arms. They didn't have any children but welcomed us into their home kindness and love. We laughed a lot, played a lot and were very happy. Our mum and dad came up to see us must have been reassured that we were alright. Despite investigations, Sue Templeman and I can't work out where this house was.

### **Leaving Quorn**

Heather and I left Quorn after about a year, initially we didn't want to go as we were having such a lovely time with the Taylors! Our father, who worked the Royal Ordnance Factories, had found himself a job in Worcester, so mum, dad and my little brother moved and it was safe for Heather and I to return home. Shortly after the war ended, we returned to Brighton.

### **Postscript**

Many years later my daughter went to university and met her future husband. He came from Loughborough and that was where they settled. When I retired, I was widowed and living in Kent and decided to move up here to be near her and her family.

This article was produced by Sue Templeman on behalf of [www.quornmuseum.com](http://www.quornmuseum.com). Thank you to Jackie Lee and her sister Heather for sharing their story and photographs.