

Childhood memories of WWII in Farnhill

By Anne Paton

Introductory Note: *Anne Paton came to Farnhill when her father Rev. Hodgkinson became the minister at Farnhill Methodist Chapel in the late 1930s. The family lived in the village until just after the end of WWII.*

During 2017 and 2018, Anne contributed to the History Group's "Farnhill WW1 Volunteers Project". Her memories of the men we were researching were always clear and insightful.

In the Covid pandemic she agreed to write a memoir for us about her childhood in the village during WWII. Sadly, her deteriorating eyesight restricted this effort to just two long, hand-written, letters; transcribed verbatim here.

News of Anne Paton's death reached the History Group in February 2023.

Graham Taylor

My first day at school, aged just 4, was in early September 1939. My second was in September 1940 – Hitler intervened.

Very much enjoying the first day, I was disappointed to be told on coming home, that I would not be going again "for a little while".

I believe that on the outbreak of war, Government regulations decreed that children under five were not to go to school. I *think* that in September 1939 the whole school may have been suspended for a few days.

By the time I re-started school things were going badly in the war – the Battle of Britain was engaged and heavy bombing of cities soon followed.

The war was all-encompassing, but showed up in the school in the form of heavy brown criss-crossed tape across the windows and an odd exercise one day when we made to crouch under the desks. I imagine to shelter us in an air-raid. That was it ! I don't remember doing it again.

It would have been soon after this that everyone was issued with a gas mask. I remember having to learn how to put mine on, with the rest of the family in the kitchen at the Manse. It was very uncomfortable and I can feel and smell the clammy black rubber still.



We were all required to take them to school. (Did we have a practice there ?) I soon became old enough to join the straggling procession of children down Main Street in the morning, with the awkward cardboard box on a string bumping against us, hung over our shoulders. I don't know when we stopped doing this. (It must have been very tiresome for the teachers to make sure we took care of them !)

Another wartime activity in school was the National Savings group. For a small sum each week (6d, 1/- ?) we could buy a Savings Stamp. These were stuck into an individual card, and when 15/- filled the card it was sent off and a Savings Certificate was exchanged in the owner's name. The money went to "the war effort". I also remember walking to the Post Office in Kildwick with mother and getting a Post Office Savings book with a Kildwick number.

Soon after the whole family got an Identity Number. I can still remember my number ! I *think* the ID numbers were used when the National Health Service was set up.

My first years in school were spent in Mrs Fort's class. The room was in the right-hand end of the building, housing 5–7 years olds; 8–10s in the middle classroom with Miss Wade; and 11–14s (leaving age) with Mr. Auty, the head, at the other end.

Allowing for the usual ups and downs, I remember a good lively school, with a sound basic discipline underlying, at least for me, a better than adequate level of education. This was shown when I eventually moved to a town school and was slightly ahead of them.

Mrs. Fort was as good as her name. She was firmly on top of her job at having to instil the 3Rs into a very mixed bag of us. I could read on arrival, but some of the children had not much use for books. Therefore I don't recall learning to read, or how it was taught; but I spent a lot of time struggling to do "proper" writing. The first exercise books had double lines and the centre part of the letter had to be between them and the loops had to go up and below the lines.

And, of course, there were the "sums", with Mrs. Fort coming round to see how we were doing – not well, in my case, much of the time.

She was much respected – a tallish middle-aged lady with a brisk way with discipline. Suspecting any serious mischief, she would rap out "Hands on heads!", instantly immobilising the whole class until she had finished with the trouble-makers.

I have no memory of caning, it certainly was not frequent thing – simply the threat of being sent to see Mr. Auty was a sufficient deterrent in most cases. His influence was always there.

School was never disturbed by air-raids, but when the 1940 big bombing raids began Farnhill's warden – a Mr. Addy – had the job of running up and down Main Street in the black-out and passing on the news to those who needed to know. (Father was in the local First Aid Group – as well as being the minister.)

He rattled the letter-boxes loudly and called through them "Yellow" – the early warning signal for possible raids in the region. I don't think he had many "Reds" if any – the signal for an imminent raid in the local area. Farnhill was only an accidental target.

But the raids were not far off. Mother and Father remembered looking out at night over the hills and seeing the sky-line red – Manchester burning (1940?).

Once, hearing a loud noise coming along the valley, an aircraft in flames came tearing past very low down; to crash into the hills some miles away. They could never discover whether it was "ours" or "theirs".

One curious memory – either a cattle grid (unlikely) or a tank trap at the Farnhill end of Bradley Road. I remember coming down from the moor into Bradley Road, a walk we often did, to find a deep trench across the road with some sort of metal props or stakes planted in it. The adults could balance on these and walk over it, but my feet were too small and I was very cross at having to scabble in the bank at the edge. Certainly it made the road impassable by cars.

This would probably have been around the time of Dunkirk when Churchill made his "we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight in the hills ..." speech. Did the authorities think our moors were a likely spot for a parachute drop of equipment?

I rather suspect another explanation – but I do definitely remember struggling to get round this strange novelty. I never knew of any others. I expect my parents found out, but it never reached me. Have you heard of it?

Meanwhile, school continued and I went up to Miss Wade's class. By then my particular friend, Margaret Slingsby, had left to go to Skipton High Juniors. I remember the terrible shock when her father was killed in an accident, exercising with the Home Guard. I had seen them travelling through the village. I am not sure that was when he died. I remember not knowing what to say to her and her brother (Peter ?). I was out of my depth. I was very fond of her and I missed her a lot.

I think the evacuees turned up quite early in the war. I recall arriving one morning at school to find that a group of the boys were in trouble for serious fighting.

Apparently some of the newly-arrived evacuees had been rubbishing their new home – too quiet, nothing to do, and above all no chip shop. Naturally the local lads weren't having that !

I was not aware of the arrangements made to allocate the children to their new homes or how many there were. Apart from the fighting it seems that most of them either settled-in, or soon went home. I didn't know where they had come from.

The one group I heard a little of were those allocated to Mrs. Sharpe at Kildwick Hall. She would, I am sure, in line with her sense of duty, have accepted the requirement. However that didn't make it easy !

Father reported that when he called there (which was not unusual) he found a mother with two (or more) children sitting the kitchen with Violet, Mrs. Sharpe's only help, as it was the only warm place in the whole building. Everyone was very uncomfortable and ill at ease with each other. One can only imagine what the family thought of being in Kildwick Hall. I suspect that they had never met anyone like Mrs Sharpe. I am sure that she would have done her best to help them, but I gather that they didn't stay long. Perhaps the person arranging the allocations had second thoughts !
