

LIFE AT ACTON HOUSE DURING WW2

BY BETTY BEST



Part of the Nissen Hut Camp at Acton

When war came, the Army Pioneers and Engineers arrived to build Acton Camp. Indeed a year before war was declared Army scouts had been ‘casing’ the whole area, so the Military knew where the camps were to go – Drumbanagher, Dromantine, Union Lodge as well as Acton.

About a year or so after war was officially declared the shipyards were bombed, and that part of Belfast went up in flames – which we saw from Acton, father having called us outside to see the sky lit up. The bombing triggered a wave of evacuees to Poyntzpass. The Glebe had three families who became friends. At Acton we had a mother and clatter of unfortunate children who hated the country, and couldn’t help wetting their beds. We tried as best we could to help, but they soon returned to Belfast. There was an equally disastrous family at the house below in Acton – they too missed the city streets, cut up the stairs for firewood though we had given them a supply. They soon went back home.

Peggy Moore came to stay with us for the duration of the war – she, Sheena and Don travelling to school (Methodist College, Belfast) on the 8 a.m. train and home on the 7 p.m. The trains were crowded – so many school children evacuated out of Belfast; factory and office workers also travelling by train as it was the main means of transport, petrol being rationed and cars off the road. Poyntzpass station was a busy place, and Mr. Porterfield

a busy and important stationmaster.

When Sheena left school to go to Queens, reading medicine, she stayed in Belfast at Riddel Hall – I was brought home from boarding school to travel with Peggy and Don. I had rather enjoyed the air-raids at school – the siren going off, tumbling out of bed, pulling on sweater and trousers and hiking down to the basement with our gas masks, sleeping bags and suitcases (which we kept under the bed packed and ready to go), the boys similarly accoutred, and all singing while the raid lasted.

Getting that 8 o’clock train was a right carry-on; father



Inside a Nissen Hut

driving us down the avenue, on the look-out for a train, or smoke swirling in the distance, sees it fast approaching; puts the boot down, and away like blazes, screeching round the corner into the station – train waiting, everyone aboard, one of the school crowd, seeing the car holds a carriage door open for us. Mr. Porterfield being a stickler for punctuality took a dim view of these shenanigans. If judged that we wouldn't make it in time, father turned off the low road and raced the train to Scarva station – all enjoying the chase.

There would be a couple of carriages of high-spirited school boys and girls heading for Inst, MCB, BRA, Bloomfield Collegiate etc. Other travellers gave the boisterous school-goes a wide berth. There were no corridor trains and that was a worry if on one's own, as I sometimes was on a Saturday half-day at school. One tried to find a carriage with others in it and hoped they



Acton House

wouldn't exit at the first stop. There were enough dodgy soldiers about to cause concern, and it wasn't unusual to have to change carriages at Lurgan or Portadown.

For a couple of years, while the English troops were at the Camps, we had Officers and their families and batmen billeted with us – two families at a time, with their batmen to clean, cook and serve their meals in their rooms. I remember a Major and his wife, with a pack of beagles kennelled in the low yard. Then there was an Hon. Mrs. Someone, very English County – tweeds, brogues and thick knit stockings: she had three golden Labradors thumping up and down the front stairs between the drawing room and bedroom.

There were numerous comings and goings of officers and wives, children and batmen. We were often invited over to Acton Camp to their concerts and entertainments.

However the families we were most involved with were Colonel and Mrs. Myers, Lorina five and John two years of age. They occupied the drawing room. And the other family – Major and Mrs. Something and two year old

Martin, had the library. The two little boys spent a lot of their time with us, from breakfast through the day to bath time – necessary because they were into coal buckets, hens' buckets and any messy place they could find. It was a great house for two wee mischievous boys, and those two were something desperate. A relief to get them to bed at night. Lorina lived full time with us, and when her mother went back to England to have her baby, John stayed with us also. Lorina, a bundle of fun came everywhere with us, and we loved having her. In church she ran up and down the aisles during prayers – she wasn't one to sit still; and when it was sermon time she thought the whole idea was to volubly take part. She loved helping in the crowded kitchen where there was never a dull moment – Jimmy and the other batman dancing round and singing Irish songs; mother and Annie and whoever else singing and dancing along, and trying to get the baking and cooking done at the same time – the wonder being anything got cooked at all. (Some years ago, John Myers returned to see again scenes of childhood)

Jimmy – a real character – with gay abandon would scoff the big dish of raspberries and cream or the apple pie meant for his Colonel and family, and improvise with whatever came to hand, his family in the drawing room oblivious to the goings-on. The war news wasn't good, and with the Army people not knowing when or to which war zone they might be sent next, there had to be a lightness and a certain enjoyment of life for the times that were in it.

General Alexander (later Field Marshall) visited Acton Camp to inspect the troops. Apparently he looked across at Acton House and remarked to one of the officers that



Mrs. Myers, Lorina and John at Acton House.



Cousin Helen, Lorina and Jack, the Colonel's driver.

it had previously been owned by his family. He didn't come over however.

The Earl of Caledon did come once – in old clothes and a raggedy car much to Don's disgust – he had been looking forward to Royalty! A very pleasant, cultured, comfortable man I remember. Said there was a similar oval room at his home.

Mother walked to Poyntzpass every week, joining a bevy of women in the Technical, making jam and cakes and anything that could be sold in aid of the war effort. I think this was a W.V.S. outfit because a lady in uniform turned up frequently with large supplies of khaki wool to knit for the troops. And mother kept us supplied at home with it – mainly socks, gloves, scarves and headgear for them.

Everyone pitched in to help the War Effort. Father, Bill Moody (who claimed kinship – his mother a Whiteside and some sort of cousin of father's) and lots of others, were tireless in organising money-making events – fetes, dances, bring-and-buy sales. A large chart was drawn up to keep check on how Poyntzpass compared with other villages and towns. The competition worked wonders.

When the English troops left, the Americans arrived – and stirred things up in Poyntzpass. Unlike the English soldiers who were poorly paid, the Americans came with money to burn, nylon stockings – very much sought after – and candy. They clearly were used to more than the village could offer – no taxis, no buses “we wouldn't put up with this back home”.

They were, however, very generous and well-liked. The

pubs and the many tearooms – Mrs. Mc Court, Rose and Sara Conlon, and fish and chips in the Court House – among others, did good trade. The soldiers from neighbouring camps crowded to the village as well. And where there were soldiers, particularly generous ones, there were women – they poured in off the trains, and on lorries.

Frazer Henderson our cousin in the Canadian Army spent his leaves at Acton, and lively times they were. Frazer happy-go-lucky, cheerful; I can't remember ever seeing him without a smile creasing his face, and the sun shining out of him. He was great fun and kept us all entertained and in fits of laughter. Once he cooked a meal, and from somewhere dug out a black suit and with a white linen serviette over his arm, served our dinner with great aplomb. He loved to hear Peter McCaveneigh singing “Galway Bay” and all the Irish songs, and playing the mouth organ.

Frazer could find amusement in things you would never think of. I remember him laughing his head off reading the Death Notices in the Newry Reporter, relishing the absurdities. Then there was the time Jack and he tripped the light fantastic at a Hunt Ball in Newry Town Hall. At some stage, having partaken not lightly but too well of the Newry Dew, Frazer slapped Major Close on the back, remarked about his fine hair cut (he was bald) and sent him tumbling down the stairs. Eventually someone brought Jack and Frazer back to Poyntzpass, glad to get rid of them at the pump from where they rolled along singing loudly, halting at the Barracks to give the Sergeant an extra serenade.



Captain Sam English and members of Poyntzpass Home Guard.

Sam English, another constant in our house liked to boast about his highly trained Home Guard. Frazer, ready for anything, was interested to see this prestigious force in action. So he and Captain English set off on day-long manoeuvres. He returned bursting with merriment at the daft bungling antics of a troop of men with not a



Sam English (left) and Frazer Henderson.

smidgen of common sense between them. When he tried to gently indicate a slight alternative Sam couldn't see the where of it at all. Nevertheless Frazer, ever diplomatic, managed to leave Sam with his inflated ego intact, remarking to mother later, *'Aunt Tiny, if the Germans invade, stay well away from the Home Guard, you'll be safer with the enemy!'*

Sam was renowned for his absent-mindedness. Once at Poyntzpass station, after loading his milk cans onto a wagon, he hopped into a carriage and, not wanting to arrive in Belfast in rubber boots, pulled them off and threw them out the window onto the platform. When the train had pulled out of the station, he looked down at his stockinged feet and realised he had no shoes with him, and would have to walk around Belfast in his dirty socks, with his big toe sticking out!

After D-Day the Belgian soldiers came to Acton camp. We watched them walking up the street in Poyntzpass with loaves under their arms tearing off chunks as they went – they were starving. Some wore ladies' shoes and some had curtains wrapped round them, anything they could lay hands on. They had been prisoners of war and then released onto troopships by the Americans and British.

Lots of Belgians came over to our house, enjoying the crack, the food and the music – at the piano they taught us French songs, and also sang Irish ones, with Peter in the middle of them.

Franz, Georges and a Count from Luxembourg came more frequently and we got to know them very well, especially Franz and Georges – both sweet on Sheena.

The Count always bowed to mother at mealtimes and kissed her hand before taking his seat. After the war mother and father went over to Belgium and stayed with Franz and George's families. They kept in touch for years.

The Belgians were the last soldiers at Acton Camp. The huts were dismantled.



Betty Best (left) with some Belgian soldiers and friends.



The Belgian flag in camp.