

War Time School Days in Selsdon - 1944/45.

(All photos taken Nov 2018)

Selsdon was mainly a new housing estate which was built in the 1930s. As a result it had a very high proportion on families with children. Selsdon School was opened in 1931 and soon outgrew the anticipated school aged population. When I started in 1944 there was already a "temporary" corrugated extension housing the school canteen and some extra classrooms. All my years at Selsdon Primary, were however, spent in the classrooms on the ground floor of the main school building.



I am not sure when I actually started, but it was certainly sometime in 1944 because the V1 doodlebugs were passing over Selsdon with some regularity. One actually crashed and demolished houses in Ingham Rd which runs alongside Selsdon School!

The bomb shelters for the primary school were buried in the bank at the back of the school and above the play grounds. There was an air raid siren outside the front of the school, so we could not miss the warning wail! But no panicked running for cover, we walked out in orderly file led by our class teachers. Once in the shelter and settled on the long bench seats in our allotted space, the lessons continued. So it was here in the shelter that I learned my ABC and two times table. When the all clear sounded, it was back to the classroom.

Behind the shelters was a corrugated iron building which housed the school canteen. In those war time days of food shortages and strict rationing, canteen dinners must have been a godsend for our mums. Unfortunately I was a very fussy eater and whilst my older brother had canteen dinners, I hated them, especially the boiled beetroot with the Monday salad. With the food shortages we could not leave the table or get the tasty pud, always jam tart with artificial cream (yum yum!), until we had eaten every scrap. So on most days I would sit there during the whole dinner break, obstinately looking at the plate and refusing to eat most of it.

Eventually I won the standoff and my Mum had the additional chores of coming to school each mid-day to take me home, making my dinner and then returning me for the afternoon lessons. Virtually every school day I had egg and chips, but eggs were rationed. Where you might wonder did the eggs come from? Let me explain.

In a previous article I mentioned the “back fields”. There was a very elderly gent named Mr Hewitt who owned a small holding in Ashen Vale. He kept some chickens but needed food for them so that they could continue to lay eggs. And the eggs were his main or probably only income. It was a government policy to provide pig bins so that all waste food: stale bread, potato peelings, food slops, etc, could be collected and fed to pigs. If you instead kept your food waste for the Egg Man as he was known, he would sell you off record eggs!

It was always rumoured (and true) that there was a lot of off record and under the counter dealing going on – if you had the means to do the trade at inflated prices. There was one very poor family in Abbey Rd who did not have the where-with-all to feed the hungry children and I often saw their son, who was in my class at school, rummaging and eating stale bread from the pig bin near our house. These were hard times, very hard for some.

But I digress, back to school.

All this walking back and forth to school soon wore out our leather soled shoes. I lived close to the school, but children were expected, and did, walk up to 3 miles to school. Over 3 miles and you could get a free bus pass, but there were very few buses and very few routes. So for most it was a case of walking. Shoes and clothes could only be bought with limited clothing coupons, so recycling was the norm. Cardboard was used as insoles to extend the life of worn out shoes, and we all wore hand-me-down clothes. My brother was 3 years older than me so his clothes, which I would get too wear, were much too large and ill fitting. However I do remember the pleasure of my first day at school. My Mum had bought the material (less coupons needed) to make my Selsdon School uniform blazer, complete with its buttons and light blue taped edging, plus some grey flannel trousers that actually fitted me. Then Cecil Ireland, Selsdon’s gent’s outfitters, had supplied the finishing touches – a Selsdon School cap and tie. How proud I was on my first day at school!

Then another memorable day at school. It was a sunny summer’s day I was going home with my Mum for my lunch time egg and chips, when only a few doors down from home, we heard the roar of an aircraft engine. Not unusual in war time with three airfields close by – Kenley, Croydon and Biggin Hill - but this was very low, skimming the roof tops. Looking up we saw a camouflaged, single engine plane with large, German insignia on fuselage and wings. We could clearly see the pilot and crewman seated behind him. The crewman was staring down at us.

“Run,” screamed my Mum, but by then the plane was roaring past us and disappearing into the distance.

It may have been one of these?



Looking back, and bearing in mind that this would have been around the time of the D-Day landings, this plane was probably on a reconnaissance mission so we were in no danger. But not many of us got that close to a Luftwaffe plane at full song!