

Dennis Francis Cook writes:

It was August 1930 when my Mother had died and I was only 9 months old, there was 12 of us in my family and I was the youngest. My Father couldn't look after us so the 3 youngest which was me, my Brother and my Sister was put into care, this was the old L.C.C.

I went to many schools. I was at one of the schools for two years which was called Banstead school. Then a war broke out and we was all sent to Reigate as evacuees. From the school we went to a village in Reigate where all the children had to stand there waiting for people to take us in their homes. After a while most of the children had gone and there was only six of us left, we waited for a while but no one else came. The lady took us round knocking on doors, after a short while four of the children had been picked which left me and another boy no where to go. We went back to the hall and waited some more when a lady turned up and took us both to her house. I was there for 6months then I was taken back to County Hall, London.

It was July 1939 which made me 9 nearly 10 years old when I was taken to Chipping Ongar School. It was a boys school, I met a Lady who was the wife of the superintendent (*Mr Uden*) of the school. She took my hand and held it and that was the first time anyone had held my hand, the first thing she said to me was 'How old are you?' I told her I was nine, from then my life started to be happier, I was there for 5 and a half years.

I was staying at Hawthorn House, there was a few houses but I stayed at this one, and as the year went by I had a very good and happy time. We would go to school in the morning and come home for dinner then back to school for 1:30pm then back home at 3:30pm for tea.



Dennis in his school uniform at Ongar Cottage Homes in 1942.

We was allowed to stay up till 7pm then went to bed. We would get up at 7am wash our hands and faces then go downstairs for breakfast.

We would go and see a film show every month on a Thursday and I remember that some of the films were Will Hay and Shirley Temple. Sometimes we would get a train into Epping to the cinema which would always be a good day.

We had a housemaster called Mr Ormen who looked after us he was also a Scouts Teacher, he showed us how to tie knots and play games. Some weeks on a Saturday we would go camping in the playing fields, that was really fun, he told us a lot about the Scouts.

I remember the school having a friendly donkey called Tupney, he would pull a cart around the school grounds carrying clean bedding, milk and fresh fruit and veg, everyone would make a fuss of him an stroke him a lot he was still there when I left.

There was a Taylor who made clothes for us, he was in the First World War and he lost a leg and a shoe mender who also lost his leg in the same war. I remember our other housemaster lost his finger in that war he used to tell us a story about how he lost it, he said that he was a guard at the palace and he was guarding the King and someone tried to shoot the King so he put his hand up to stop the bullet and the bullet took his finger off, his name was Mr Blake.



*Tom Harvey, pictured in 1967,
the shoemaker remembered by Dennis.*

Once a month on a Sunday the Parents would come down to see their boys, I often looked out to see if there was anyone there for me but there weren't. I sat back and watched them playing and talking to their parents, the boys looked like they was having a good time and looked so happy being with their mum and dads.

One day the Headmaster called me over and told me that they had found my family which really shocked me because I didn't know I had a family, I was only a baby when we was put in care then we got separated.

I couldn't wait till that Sunday came so I could see my family. It was my Father and my Brother Alf that came to see me and I didn't know what to say to them, my dad just give me a big hug and asked me how I was, I told him I was ok, then he told me about my brothers and sisters and told me what they was doing. He asked me about the school and I told him it was ok and he smiled then before we knew it it was time to go, it had gone so quick I couldn't wait to see them again.

I saw them every third Sunday off the month for six months. One day I had some very bad news, the Superintendent took me to a bench, sat me down then told me that my Father had died, he said that he was sorry that he had died and sat with me for a bit, he gave me a hug then he went. I stayed on the bench for some time then I went back to play.

I remember one time when the Americans from the Air Field came to the school and played some music for us and talked to us it was brilliant and I remember that they gave us some chewing gum, we all had such a good time.

Some soldiers was on their way to Dover for the Invasion of Germany when they came to stay at our school for 2 weeks, they had big lorries and tanks all around the oval and they let us see their guns. We had to sleep downstairs on our mattresses when they stayed because they had the top two dormitories, the house had four dormitories all together and there was 8 beds in each dorm, there was the top 2 floors, the ground floors which were play rooms, a kitchen and a dining room, anyway back top the soldiers. When we woke up one morning the soldiers had gone, which we was all disappointed to see as we had a lot of fun with them being there.

POWs came to our school one time and we had a game of Football with them and we won but I think they just let us win it was a fun game.

Things chanced one night when the sirens went off and we heard guns going off it was very frightening and I remember seeing some of the boys crying, we was all glad when it stopped.

The next morning some of us went outside to see what had gone on and we saw some men looking at something, we went over to have a look ourselves and there was this big drum, the headmaster called us over and made us stand with him then some other man started taking some photographs of it, I think he was from the Newspaper. The drum was 6feet long and 3feet round, it was a drum of Incendiary Bombs, it was dropped from a German plane on their way back to Germany.

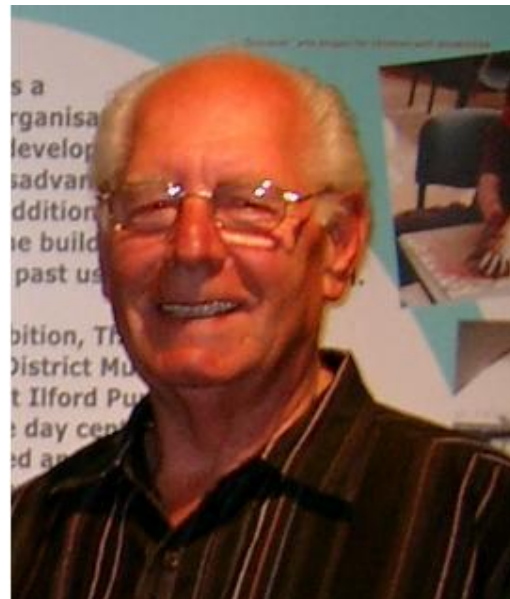
On a Saturday and Sunday we were allowed to go down to the village and to the country side all the boys love it, but we had to be back by 5pm for tea, there was one time on a Sunday when two Police men came to the school and told the headmaster that two boys had been hurt playing with bombs, they were sent to hospital and we never saw them again they were only 12years old their names were Linch and Lowden.

As for the boys at the school some of them were from poor families, some had no family and some lost their families in the war.

I left the school when I was 15 years old.



Dennis aged 20



*Dennis on his visit to the
'Tales from the Boarders' exhibition, 2007*