

MY RUSSELL HILL DAYS
By Margaret Carden née Butler (at school 1938-1948)



Pictured above: Pat, Lemartha, Margaret, Nancy

My Russell Hill schooldays were eventful – never dull. I began them in 1937, as a seven year old, at Hope Morley House. I remember being particularly enthralled with Hope Morley's wonderful day room, with its large rocking horse and dolls house. Classes were small and our education formal, but we also found time to acquire such practical skills as knitting ❶. Miss Bird was head teacher of the kindergarten and she ensured our early school life was both enjoyable and calm. It was a pleasant introduction to what was to be a long association with the school.

But all this was to change after the outbreak of World War 2 in 1939, when it was agreed the girls and junior boys, based at Russell Hill, should exchange schools with the senior boys at Ballards; the theory being that boys were bravest so therefore best able to endure the air-raids directed at nearby Croydon Airport. Actually, I believe we had the best of that deal, because Ballards was a new, modern school, beautifully equipped with chapel, dining hall, libraries, lecture hall and a main hall with rotunda. Furthermore it was set in woodlands, which made a wonderful setting for childish explorations. Ballards even boasted an outdoor swimming pool; though it did tend to green over and become a haven for frogs by the end of summer term!

To me, as a child, it seemed that the transfer from one building to another was quite a simple matter. Certainly we settled in very easily and were quickly equipped with attractive blue corduroy housecoats (kindly donated by Jaegars) to ensure we would be warmly dressed during the night air-raids. Which was just as well, for ironically, of the two schools it was Ballards which experienced the wrath of the German bombers when, in June 1940, several high explosive bombs were seemingly aimed at it. The closest of which, I clearly recall, sounded like an approaching tube train before it exploded close to the gymnasium. Dirt and stones cascaded through the open windows of our lower dormitory despite them having been protected by sandbags. A second explosion followed; one of excited chatter which, I guess, was a mix of fear and relief that had to be called to order by the housemistress instructing us to go back to sleep. Naturally, next morning we were anxious, and not a little excited, to see for ourselves where the bomb had landed. And what a great play area that large crater beside the gym soon became! Meanwhile, thanks to the bombs, the school had lost its gas supply. But the kitchen staff rose to the occasion and produced a dinner that day of corned beef hash, cooked over open fires. Very soon after this event I was, in the words of my report book, 'Withdrawn owing to war conditions.' Whether I was alone in being 'withdrawn' or the school actually closed, I do not know.

My report book records that in September 1941 I resumed, having been an evacuee at my grandparents' home in Cambridge. For a while school life progressed comfortably and in relative tranquillity: until we were again threatened by German air attacks. This time it was 'doodle bugs'. Flying bomb raids became frequent and led to many daytime spells in the air-raid shelter; namely the sandbagged lower dormitory. I remember clearly the sunny afternoon in June 1944 when, as we sat huddled safely together in that shelter, engaged with needlework, we heard the familiar throaty sound of a bomb approaching. Suddenly there was that fearful silence when the engine stops and the bomb begins to fall. We held our breath in fear. Then again we were spared, for the engine picked up again for a short while, only to crash and explode some distance away. Term was curtailed and once again we were sent home for extended holiday early on the 8th July. However, the war progressed and we were able to return in September and our education was not to be interrupted again. Finally, we celebrated VE Day (Victory in Europe) on 8th May 1945 with a ramble on the nearby Shirley Hills. ❷

With the war over the school exchange was reversed and we girls returned to Russell Hill, Purley. I know I took a while to accept surroundings, which seemed strange after so many years away. For my part, the final stage of my education meant I became a prefect, then Head Girl, took my school certificate in 1946 and Higher School Certificate in 1948. However I was too young to take the place offered me at Homerton College, Cambridge so our headmistress, Miss Reade, employed me for a year's uncertificated teaching in Hope Morley House along with Miss Bird: my wheel had turned full cycle.

At the time of writing, 2012, I am a retired geography teacher. Still enjoying my marriage of 59 years, have two daughters and two grandchildren; and always look back on my years at Russell Hill School with pleasure and gratitude.

Photographs:

❶ Hope Morley knitters



RUSSELL HILL SCHOOL, PURLEY, HOPE MORLEY HOUSE CLASSROOM.

Photo: Bedford Lamore, London.

2 VE Day, 8 May 1945, Shirley Hills

