

THANK YOU, BREWOOD

More than 70 years on, *Choice* reader Peter Couzins says a belated but heartfelt thank you to the village that welcomed him as an evacuee

THE YEAR was 1939. It was Sunday, September 3 and I was eight years old. We had all been issued with gas masks, and each house was also given an Anderson shelter; this had to be partially buried in the garden, away from the house, and covered in soil. It had four slatted bunks, two either side, one above the other. The air-raid sirens had numerous tests, and were now silent. We knew that the next time they sounded it would be the signal that we were now at war with Nazi Germany. At 11am on this Sunday the sirens sounded – we were at war.

I was living in Garlinge, a small village on the outskirts of Margate, with my father, brother and two sisters all older

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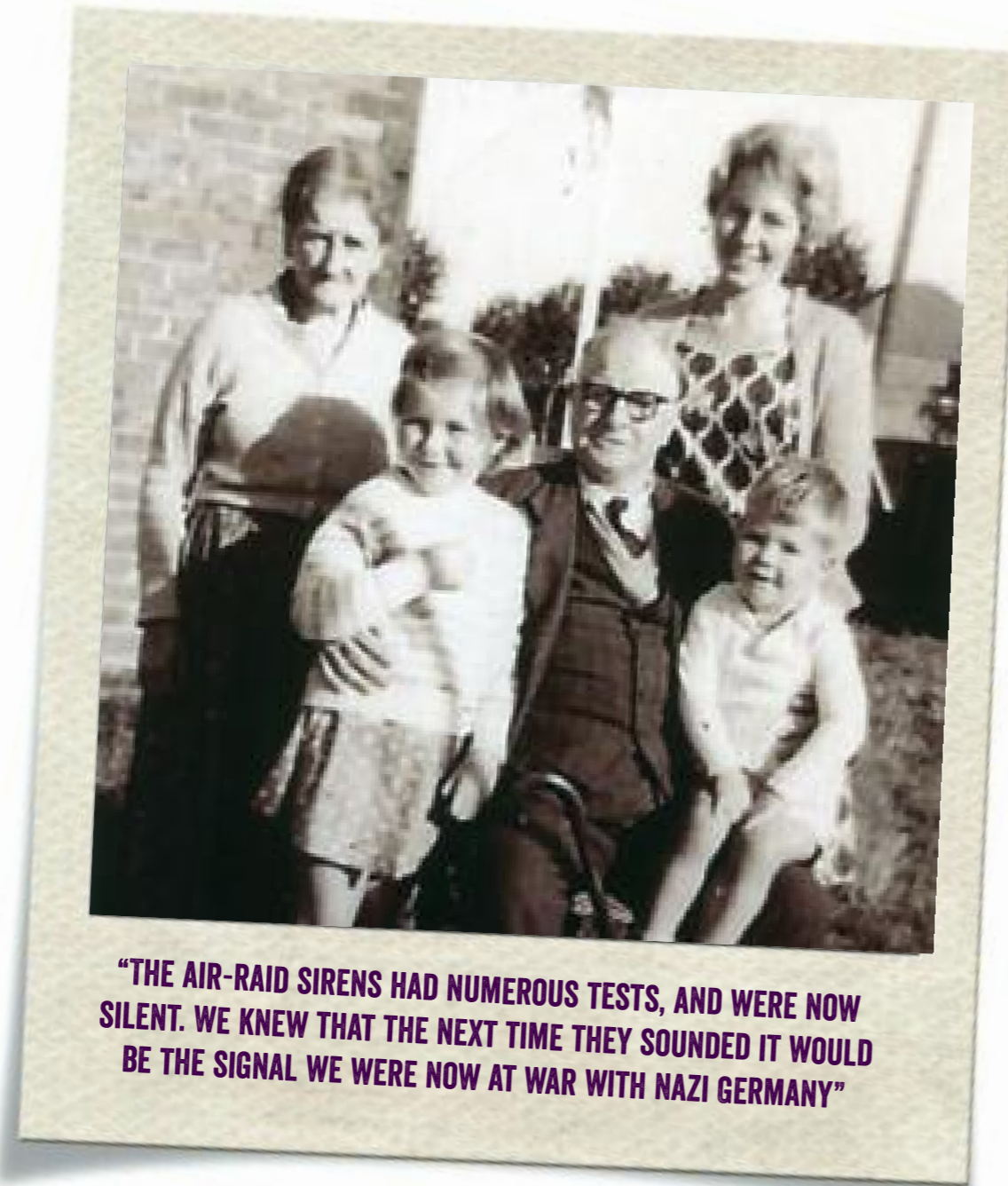
than me. My mother had died of cancer when I was 15 months old, so I had been living in a foster home until just before starting school, when an aunt (my mother's sister) came to live with us to look after our family. The Depression was just about over and my father was back working full-time as a bricklayer.

Very little seemed to be happening in the war, and it was referred to as the Phoney War. The Germans then invaded Belgium and France and the Allied troops were pushed back into a small part of France around Dunkirk. A big operation was launched – called Dynamo – to get as many service personnel as possible back to England.

The government commandeered some ships, and smaller vessels volunteered: pleasure boats, fishing boats, sailing yachts, and anything that could cross the Channel

and pick up a few men. In May 1940 I was nine years old and because of the impending invasion, the government decided to evacuate the children to a safer area, away from the coast. France is only

about 35 miles across the Channel. We had to report to the school. I had a small homemade back pack containing all my clothes, one pair of underpants, one pair of socks, and a shirt – everything else I was



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wearing. My gas mask was in a cardboard box, hanging precariously on a piece of string, slung over my shoulder. I also had a small pack of sandwiches.

Buses were waiting for us at the school, ready to take us to the station. We boarded the buses with our teachers for the short ride to Margate station, which is right on the seafront. In those days Margate had a pier and about 20 ships were lined up waiting to dock so they could unload their cargo of troops.

We got on board the steam train, not knowing where we were going; it chugged out of the station, and we were on our way. We all chatted away, there must have been quite a noise, and for some children it was the first time they had been on a train, or even left the local area. The teachers did not say much; I think they were a lot more concerned than the children.

After what seemed like hours, the train stopped at a station; we didn't know where it was as all the boards with the station names on had been removed for security

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reasons. On the other side of the platform was another train crowded with Belgian or French soldiers, who had different-shaped helmets from British troops. They had oranges, and some passed them over to the children on our train. After some time the train continued on its way.

We arrived some time later at a place called Penkridge, in Staffordshire. We were taken to a local school, where they gave us tea and sandwiches; we slept that night in the school hall on mattresses. The following day, a few children including me were not well, so we had to stay at the school. The rest of the class and the teachers were taken to a small village called Brewood, pronounced Brood. Two days later I was taken to Brewood to join the rest of my class.

Unfortunately, all the billets had been taken so Mr Freshwater, the headmaster of the local school, agreed to take me until a more permanent home could be found. Eventually Mrs Lucy Adams, the lady who cleaned for the headmaster, said



Peter Couzins, the young evacuee; far left, Mr and Mrs Adams with Peter's wife Pauline and their children Sharon and Stephen on a visit to Margate in 1962

The Adams family were very good to me, considering they only got ten shillings a week – 50p in today's money – as I must have cost them a lot more than that. We had a very large garden, and I would help with the work, or so I thought.

During the war people were allowed to keep one pig a year for personal consumption. Mr Adams and his employer each kept one pig, slaughtering one animal every six months and having half each. Mrs Adams would make brawn, and render the fat down for lard.

Mr Adams cured the side for bacon and the leg for ham; once cured, these would be hung up on the ceiling. We also kept poultry for eggs, and the cockerels were fattened up and sold at Christmas.

One of my jobs was to take Mr Gosling's pony to the shoemith's to be shod, a walk of about three miles, and wait for it to be shod and then walk it back again.

On Sundays I would go to Brewood church for the 11am service and sit on my own as I didn't know anyone in the church and I didn't have a clue what was going on. The Adamses thought it only right, as I had always attended Sunday school before the war.

After the war I visited the Adams family many times and, after I married, my wife and I took our daughter with us. Mrs Adams would take my daughter to collect the eggs first thing in the morning, and then cook them for breakfast.

I was very happy all the time I lived in Brewood, and never heard any complaints from the other evacuees. I returned home before the war had ended and we still had a few air-raids and some cross-Channel shelling. However, the writing was on the wall, as they say, and the end of the war was in sight. The last time I visited Brewood was around 1962 for the funeral of Mr Adams, the passing of a true gentleman and friend.

And now after all this time, at last, I say to the good people of Brewood, 70 years late: “Thank you for taking care of us evacuees, in our time of need.”

she would take me. She took me to her home on Kiddermore Green Road and this was to be my new home for the duration of the war.

Mrs Adams was a hard-working lady of slight stature, and her husband Frank was an honest hard-working, straight-talking ex-coal miner who was no longer able to work in the pits due to a worn-out hip joint – today they would just replace the hip joint. He must have been in a lot of

pain, but he never complained. Len, the eldest son, worked as a bricklayer, soon to be called up into the Army, Nancy was a school teacher, later to go into the ATS, and Frank was the youngest, in his final year at school.

Mr Adams was working as a gardener for a Mr Gosling, a solicitor in Wolverhampton, who lived on the outskirts of the village. Mr Adams's first words were: “If he comes to live with us, he has to live as one of our family,” and live as one of the family I did.

At first our class stayed together, with our own teacher Miss Martin, but gradually, we were integrated with the local teachers and children. Living on Kiddermore Green Road, I soon made friends with the local children.

They called me a cockney, because of my Kentish accent, and they all had a strong Black Country accent – we all got along fine. Accents in those days were more pronounced than today as people seldom travelled very far. The war was to change all that.