

Wartime Evacuee Returns

Memories of Dorothy Beth (nee Cohen)

Collated by Norman Harrison

During the Second World War, Kibworth housed numerous children evacuated from London. One such evacuee was Dorothy Cohen who arrived by train at the beginning of September 1939, aged six. And, in September 2012, she came back with her memories to see Kibworth once more.

Dorothy married Frank Beth in 1952 and after training in youth work they emigrated to Israel. Much of her adult life has been spent on a Kibbutz where she brought up her own children. So Dorothy (Devorah in Hebrew), now a widow, had flown back to England to re-visit the places she knew as a youngster.



Dorothy Beth on her return visit to Kibworth in Sep 2012

Her first wartime stay in Kibworth was with Cyril and Gertrude Dunkley at 13 Weir Road. Now, 73 years later, she had a splendid welcome from the current householder, Wendy Evans, when she visited the property. Dorothy explored the house and could remember especially the attic style bedroom which she used to share with another evacuee. She recalled how the room was very cold and the other girl would cry most evenings



Gertrude Dunkley



The lavender doll

when Vera Lynn's song 'Goodnight Children Everywhere' was broadcast over the radio. The Dunkleys had no children of their own and did all they could to support the two evacuees in their care. Dorothy had her 7th birthday in October 1939. One kind gesture by Mrs Dunkley was making her a lavender doll; Dorothy has kept that doll through the years and brought it with her on this visit - complete with the original lavender flowers inside the doll's dress.

Evacuees joined local schools and so Dorothy's first in Kibworth was the Infants' School in Paget Street. On visiting the old school she could remember again the building and the separate girls' and boys' playgrounds and entrances.

The early months of World War 2 (WW2) were relatively quiet as regards bombing in London. So Dorothy returned to London for a short while. Bombing intensified in 1940 so she was sent with two cousins to a coal mining village in Wales but didn't stay long as that village was soon bombed. Back in London, Dorothy's road was again under enemy fire and so she evacuated once more to Kibworth.

During this second stay in Kibworth, Dorothy lived with a different family which she recalled was named Gilbert. The Kibworth History Society had a few days' foreknowledge of Dorothy's 2012 visit and was able to unravel various details about where she lived, schooling, leisure activities and so on. One unresolved item was the precise identity of the Gilberts, but by elimination it possibly was the Gilbert family in Buller Street. Older houses have of course been modernised over the decades and on visiting Buller Street Dorothy couldn't be sure that we had found the right property. The Gilberts did have daughters, one being two years old at the time and Dorothy remembered having to look after this child when she went for walks with her. The older sister, in her early teens, would go out sometimes having dated one of the American soldiers stationed nearby.

She remembered that Mr Gilbert occasionally showed her local newspaper reports. One report on 6 Dec 1940 concerned her father and mother, Harry and Zisel Cohen; Mrs Cohen by then was living in Weir Road and Mr Cohen was visiting from London. Mr Cohen with his parents left Ukraine for England when he was three months old, but no application for British citizenship was ever made. So, in wartime the Cohens were classed as aliens and had to report to the nearest police station whenever they left London. On coming to Kibworth Mr Cohen failed to do that and so was arrested. The transcript of the newspaper report is below.

ALIENS SUMMONED

Harry Cohen, a Russian alien, of London; was fined 10s. for being absent from his residence after 10.30p.m. A similar summons against his wife, Zisel Cohen, stated to be living in Weir-road, Kibworth, was dismissed.

P.C. Bason said he saw Mr. and Mrs. Cohen at a dance at Kibworth Village Hall at 10.50p.m. on Saturday, Nov. 16th. Cohen told him that he was ignorant of the regulations concerning aliens.

Supt. J. W. Mee said that Cohen had a slip in the back of his registration book on which the regulations were printed.

Mrs. Cohen said there was no such slip in her book.

Report from the Market Harborough Advertiser & Midland Mail: Friday, December 6th, 1940

A further account was of a concert at Kibworth's Village Hall on 29 Mar 1941. This musical evening had been arranged by Audrey and Aileen Cull when both adults and children performed. The newspaper report was very complimentary about the entertainers, among whom Dorothy Cohen 'was much admired'. A shortened version of the report is given below.

SUCCESSFUL MUSICAL EVENING

The Village Hall was crowded to the doors on Saturday evening, many being unable to obtain admission to a "musical evening" arranged by Audrey and Aileen Cull. The first part of the programme was given by pupils of Aileen Cull. Some of these, young though they may be, showed real musical ability ... The second part of the programme was a musical fairy play, "The Capture of Spring," by Florence Una Norris. This proved a great success. The chief parts were taken by Monica Bird (Spring), Betty Badcock (King Sun), Gladys Durham (Winter), Cynthia Ward (Golden Ray), Jennie Armson and Dorothy Cohen (The Mortal Children, Ted and Phyllis respectively), Doreen Bennett (Snow Fairy). Other characters included Sunbeams, Guardian Fairies, Snowflakes and Flowers. Monica Bird made a charming "Spring," and did her part well; Betty Badcock was well fitted to her part as "King Sun"; Dorothy Cohen, as "Phyllis," was much admired, doing her part extremely well; Joyce Millard was also suited to her part as "Jack Frost" - she, too, did well; Cynthia Ward, Gladys Durham, Jessie Armson and Doreen Bennett all did their parts very well. The Sunbeams, Guardian Fairies, Snowflakes and Flowers made a pretty sight in their dresses, etc., of different colours, and danced and sang well. At the close of the performance Audrey Cull thanked all who had helped in any way to make the evening a success. The children selling programmes met with nothing but courtesy, and this was much appreciated. A dance followed from 9p.m. to 11p.m. There was also a good attendance for this. It is hoped that about £15 will be raised for the Red Cross.

Report from the Market Harborough Advertiser & Midland Mail: Friday, April 4th, 1941

Dorothy was quite excited to be able to read the actual newspaper report once again during her 2012 visit! This visit to Kibworth included a tour of the Village Hall where she could re-live the event over 70 years ago and the special dress made for her to play the role of Phyllis.



Dorothy Beth and family touring Kibworth Village Hall in Sep 2012

By 1940, Dorothy had moved to the National School, known locally as the 'Big School', in Station Street (now a doctors' surgery). The headmaster, Mr C J Mansell, recorded in his log book for 14 Sep 1939 '90 pupils from Newington Green Junior Boys' School, London, evacuated to this area started at school today'. Evacuees came and went, but inevitably class sizes grew and adjustments to teaching and accommodation had to be made. By the close of 1940 the County Council's Education Committee learnt that 12,250 evacuees were in Leicestershire's elementary schools and 936 in grammar schools.

Dorothy had two clear recollections of enemy action over Kibworth. Whilst doing a rehearsal in the school yard, a German plane flew so low over the village that she actually saw the pilot and the 'swastika' on the plane's fuselage. The other event was whilst practising the piano at the Dunkley's house. A bomb was dropped nearby and the sound of the explosion made her fall off the piano stool! She was a keen reader and was especially drawn to 'Just William' books; whenever the latest William book came to the school library she would be first to borrow it. Later, and whilst at Kibworth's National School, Dorothy sat her 11+ examination.

Not everything was smooth running at the Gilberts' house. Mr Gilbert would sometimes taunt Dorothy about her Jewish background and the possibility that a German invasion would

result in her internment. She recalls running away from the house to a friend of her mother's in a nearby street (understood to be Mrs Silver) and wrote to her parents pleading for them to take her home.

Dorothy did return to London but soon she was back in Kibworth, for the third time. Expectant mothers and mothers with infants could also be evacuated and this was the case when a brother (Raymond) to Dorothy was born early in 1943. Although she can remember that on this occasion her mother rented a cottage for them, it is not certain where the cottage was. Research suggests that it could have been Paget Street (Dorothy referred to the cottage being owned by a spiritualist who lived next door), and on visiting last month and looking at the cottages there, she thought this may well be the correct location.

Family members joined Dorothy on this historic 2012 return to Kibworth for a day. She came with her brother (Stanley), still living in England, and three of her grown up children (two from California and one from Israel). The guided tour of Kibworth also included the railway station, Church Hill (which as a child seemed to be very steep) and St Wilfrid's Church, all of which she remembered.



Dorothy Beth and family having just visited 13 Weir Road, Kibworth, where Dorothy first lived as an evacuee in 1939