



Penrith Town Council

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VE DAY 8TH MAY 2020

WW2 COMMUNITY MEMORIES

WW2 Evacuation



When the Second World War was recognised as a growing threat, the Government and people in Britain were afraid that thousands of civilians would be killed by bombs dropped on British cities. So, evacuation procedures were organised. In the event that War was declared, the intention was to evacuate school children and others away from the large cities to 'reception areas' in the countryside.

Summer, 1938 - Penrith Billeting Team

Volunteers from the Penrith Billeting Committee were based at the Town Hall. The team had visited householders in Penrith during the summer of 1938 to find out what accommodation might be available for the Newcastle Royal Grammar School (RGS) boys, masters and their wives in the event of war. Householders were asked to voice a preference for older or younger boys. The billeting officer, Mr. Huntley and his assistants, then matched the accommodation available with the lists of RGS boys, masters and their families.

The government agreed to pay billeting allowances to householders who took in evacuees, 8s/6p i.e. 8shillings and 6pence per boy per week, and £1.1shillings for an adult. The money was to be paid through the post office on the production of authorisation.

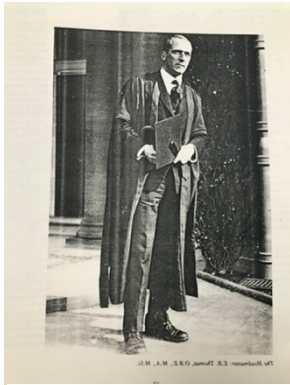


Figure 1. Mr. E.R Thomas,
Headmaster of RGS.

In June 1939, the RGS Headmaster, Mr E.R. Thomas visited Penrith to meet with Mr Huntly, the Town Clerk, also Mr Tranter the Headmaster of Queen Elizabeth Grammar School, and the Minister and Trustees of Penrith Methodist Church in Wordsworth Street, to discuss the arrangements for hosting the RGS evacuees in the event War was declared.

Penrith 1938-1939

Between 1938 and 1939, Penrith was a small country town with around 9,000 inhabitants. Trains to and from the town's railway station connected people to and from Keswick and the City of Carlisle. In addition, buses from the central bus station ran to nearby villages and towns. Penrith amenities included two cinemas, a small repertory theatre, several hotels and boarding houses, shops of all kinds and a market hall, where stalls sold local produce on Tuesdays and Saturdays. In addition, there were several garages and a number of local schools and places of worship.

War Declared 3rd September, 1939

After the Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain issued Britain's declaration of War on 3rd September 1939, he formed a War Cabinet which included Winston Churchill as First Lord of the Admiralty and Viscount Halifax as Foreign Secretary.

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RGS Evacuated to Penrith

The city of Newcastle was designated a 'danger area' so the Headmaster and Governors of Newcastle Royal Grammar School (RGS) thought it was prudent to make advance arrangements to move the school out to the country. Arrangements were made to move the school to Penrith. Subsequently, words such as 'billets,' 'evacuation' and 'evacuees' came into regular use.

The RGS was evacuated to Penrith on Friday 1st February 1939. Haversacks were checked before leaving and seen to be labelled with their owner's name. Each of the boys had to have a gas mask. After their journey from Newcastle, the boys spilled out onto Penrith's the Railway Station

A 'Reception Committee greeted the evacuees and took them off to Brunswick Road School, where they were fed tea and buns and given a carry-bag with 'iron rations.' Cars then ferried the boys to their billets. Many of the boys were nervous they'd be left and also worried about moving in with strangers. However, the evacuation and billeting procedures were finalised by evening.

With the advent of War, Penrith increased its population for the next 5 years and the RGS evacuees in their bright blue caps and blazers became a common sight in the town.

Arrangements for teaching

The day after arrival and allocation of billets, the RGS evacuees assembled at 9.15am in their headquarters in the Methodist Church, Wordsworth Street. The Church, including the ground floor and the gallery, was completely filled with boys, their Headmaster and their tutors.

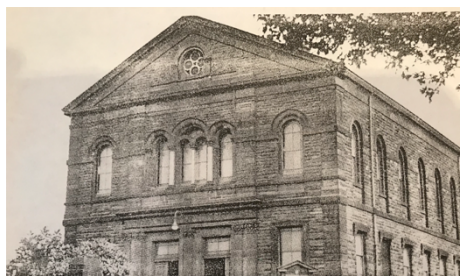


Figure 2 Penrith Methodist Church, Wordsworth Street.

Wordsworth Street Methodist Church

Initially, RGS shared Penrith's school buildings with local children who had use of the buildings in the morning, while RGS boys had use in the afternoons. Eventually, other venues, including Christchurch Parish Buildings, were used both mornings and afternoons. The younger boys used an elementary school close to the Railway

Station, while senior boys used Penrith Grammar School. In due course, RGS hired rooms all over Penrith to allow both morning and afternoon lessons. Christchurch Parish Rooms, St Andrews Parish Rooms, The Frieholders filled bathsnds Meeting House, Fell Lane Methodist Church

Rooms, the YMCA, Toc H Rooms and the Gas Showrooms all provided space that was used by RGS for teaching.

The Winter of 1939-1940 was extremely severe and lessons had to be cancelled. Youngsters were able to skate on Edenhall Pond and sledge on the golf course. However, at the end of January a blizzard isolated Penrith completely from the rest of the country. The intense frost that followed froze the service pipes and standpipes were set up on the streets on certain days. Householders had to fill baths and other receptacles and make the water last until the next time the standpipes were made available. Primus stoves were set up in the outside lavatories in the hope of keeping the frost out. Hot water bottles left under beds in the day were frozen solid by bed-time. Wet towels were frozen stiff by morning. The extremely cold weather lasted for several weeks but all survived.

Attempts were made to ensure the RGS and local people lived in harmony. The Cumberland and Westmorland Herald published articles to help the process. Hosts and hostesses were invited to musical and drama evenings. However, some evacuees returned home, either because of homesickness, some tension between them and their hosts or because the areas they lived in weren't subjected to the heavy air raids that had been feared.

By 1951, convoys of army vehicles going North passed through Penrith, which was then on the main Western route to Scotland. There were three "bottle-necks" in the Town so hold-ups were very common. (**Find out where these are!!**). Later in the War, much larger convoys of American troops were seen going South. By the time the summer term of 1940 ended, Holland, Belgium and the West coast of France were already in enemy hands and Britain faced the enemy alone.

The Local Defence Volunteers were formed, the fore-runners to the Home Guard. Cases of rifles arrived from America and some were unpacked in the School Drill Hall. The rifles had been left over from the 1914-18 war and the Americans had kept them in good condition, sending them to Britain after the British Army had lost most of its arms at Dunkirk.



Figure 3 Sandbags in Drill Hall

Besides the rifles, it wasn't unusual to see sand-bags stored in the Drill Hall along with the rifles.

School Allotments

The Headmaster, who was himself very keen on working on the school allotments to help "Dig for Victory," encouraged the boys who stayed in Penrith over the summer to volunteer and get involved. The allotment field lay to the East of Beacon Road and despite being full of Couch Weed, was divided into working plots.



Figure 4 "Digging for Victory" The Headmaster

Agricultural Camps

A number of volunteers from RGS got involved in Farm Camps situated close to Penrith. One such was in Skirwith about six miles east of Penrith and another was started at Calthwaite, a small village about 6 miles North of Penrith. Some of the boys lived in the empty mansion called Calthwaite Hall. Another camp was established at Ainstable, about ten miles from Penrith. Some of the boys cycled from their billets in Penrith to work on these agricultural farms.



Figure 5. Agricultural Camps.

Forestry Camps and Scouting

Michael Pybus, an RGS Sixth Former became a Scoutmaster and held a Forestry Camp at Hawes End on the shores of Derwentwater. A Scout troop had already been formed with boys who had been Scouts in Newcastle and wanted to carry out normal scouting activities while billeted in Penrith. They often used Cowraik Quarry off the Beacon Road. The RGS Headmaster was an avid supporter of these activities and in total, 183 boys from RGS worked on farms during the summer of 1940.

Other School Activities

Many other activities were encouraged, for example, a Gym Club that put on paying displays with funds going to the Penrith War Hospitals, also a Boxing Club and a Bird Club. The XX1 Drama club put on a production on Hamlet in Penrith Playhouse. Cricket was also extremely popular. The Junior Training Corps, which was formerly known as the Officers Training Corp was also formed along with an arm of the Air Training Corps under Flying Officer G.S Dean and Pilot Officer G.S Dean and Pilot Officer D. Meaken. When staff left to join the RAF, Mr. and Mrs McDonald joined the staff together with Miss Hastings and Dr. W. Hauser, a refugee from Germany.

Billets, Hotels and Private Houses

After the first few weeks in Penrith, some of the boy's parents arrived in the town from Newcastle to see where their sons were billeted. This caused friction at times. In some billets 3 boys shared a bed and some of the boys must have been unhappy and anxious since bed-wetting became an issue that caused or exacerbated difficulties already existing in some billets. Several boys were taken out of their billets and went to live with their mothers in rented accommodation. While difficulties were in the main sorted over time, the number of private billets decreased, and small hotels and boarding houses were used to replace them. However, it wasn't all doom and gloom and a mutual regard grew in some billets between the boys and their foster parents resulting in the development of long-term friendships.

School Houses included **Collingwood**, **Eldon**, **Horsley** and **Stowell**. A hostel was used by some boys from the junior school, while **Argyll House** on Wordsworth Street, which was run by a retired lady inspector of schools, accommodated a number of boys and also a few schoolmistresses. **Woodland House** near the bottom of Wordworth Street was also used by some of the junior boys throughout their stay in Penrith. **Sandath House** near the top of Fell Lane, the home of Mr & Mrs J.C Kidd, initially took in twelve boys and a Master, Mr. Ashley Rock and his wife. However, after Mr Kidd left to take up a ministerial post in Wales, he let the house out. After a housekeeper had been found, **Sandath House** was filled with over 40 boys of all ages together with Miss Bullock and two to three staff.

Lynwood at Beacon Bank was rented along with **Beacon Bank** on Beacon Road at the corner of Fell Lane, **Woodland House** and **Beaumont** on Graham Street. In Beacon Bank, which was largely unfurnished, camp beds were set up by the local Council. Over time, **Beaumont** and **Lynwood** were found to be too small so had to close. However, a large empty house called **Roundthorn** was found only a few miles outside Penrith and was taken over as a hostel by the Newcastle Education Authority, who then paid for food, fuel, lighting and running expenses. It was agreed that supplementary billeting allowances would be made to help alleviate costs and keep parity with other billets. More hostels were located, including **Hazelbank** in the village of Yanworth a few miles South West of Penrith.

Not all boys were happy with communal living in the hostels, with one boy habitually running away, being caught and brought back. However, he was eventually freed from communal living. While there was a good amount of anxiety, many of the boys enjoyed their life in Penrith very much.

What has become known as D-Day happened on June 6th 1944, involving 156,000 American, British and Canadian Forces, who landed on 5 Beaches along a 50 mile stretch of heavily fortified coast in France's Normandy region.

D-Day marked the beginning of the end of WW2 in Europe although it resulted in many deaths and injuries. However, WW2 continued until Japan surrendered in September 1945, finally ending the War which had lasted for 6 long years and had resulted in the death of some 75 million people, including both military personnel and civilians who had died because of deliberate genocide, massacres, mass bombings, disease and starvation.

DEATHS BY COUNTRY

Country	Military Deaths	Total Civilian and Military Deaths
Albania	30,000	30,200
Australia	39,800	40,500
Austria	261,000	384,700
Belgium	12,100	86,100
Brazil	1,000	2,000
Bulgaria	22,000	25,000
Canada	45,400	45,400
China	3-4,000,000	20,000,000
Czechoslovakia	25,000	345,000
Denmark	2,100	3,200
Dutch East Indies	--	3-4,000,000
Estonia	--	51,000
Ethiopia	5,000	100,000
Finland	95,000	97,000
France	217,600	567,600
French Indochina	--	1-1,500,000
Germany	5,533,000	6,600,000-8,800,000
Greece	20,000-35,000	300,000-800,000
Hungary	300,000	580,000
India	87,000	1,500,000-2,500,000
Italy	301,400	457,000
Japan	2,120,000	2,600,000-3,100,000
Korea	--	378,000-473,000
Latvia	--	227,000
Lithuania	--	353,000

Luxembourg	--	2,000
Malaya	--	100,000
Netherlands	17,000	301,000
New Zealand	11,900	11,900
Norway	3,000	9,500
Papua New Guinea	--	15,000
Philippines	57,000	500,000-1,000,000
Poland	240,000	5,600,000
Romania	300,000	833,000
Singapore	--	50,000
South Africa	11,900	11,900
Soviet Union	8,800,000- 10,700,000	24,000,000
United Kingdom	383,600	450,700
United States	416,800	418,500
Yugoslavia	446,000	1,000,000

Reference for above: Internet Source downloaded 23 February 2020.

<https://www.nationalww2museum.org/students-teachers/student-resources/research-starters/research-starters-worldwide-deaths-world-war>

The RGS boys, their masters and families left Penrith when the school re-assembled in Newcastle in July 1944.