

## **Holmewood**

### The Camp

Some people called it 'tent city' or 'tin city', but to me it has always been 'the camp'. I am talking about the group of Nissan huts in Holmewood which were built for the American forces during World War II; these were converted into homes for local people. At the entrance to the 'camp' was a guard house which was turned into a small shop.

I lived at No. 3 which stood alone on the left hand side of the road, quite close to the strip of woods that runs along the B660 towards the A1. More huts were placed in a circle and along the east side of the road.

On entering the hut or better known as bungalows, you went straight into the kitchen with the bathroom on the right. All the bungalows had running water, the only properties in Holme to have this luxury. Moving through the kitchen you went into the living area where there was a large black range to keep us warm in winter. Going deeper into the bungalow, there were three bedrooms running off a passage (great for football). A simple home but very welcoming.

It was like a small community, all the children would play together (we were affectionately known as the 'camp kids') and it was not unusual on a summer's evening for mums to be joining in, turning a clothes line into a skipping rope and with one each side of the road turning the rope for us kids to jump in and out. We had cricket matches and made old carts out of bits of wood, pram wheels, and anything we find. There was a ramp in the top corner near the back woods where the Americans used to mend vehicles, we would take the home made carts up to the top and race down.

During the summer holidays the boys would collect wood and old tyres to make the annual bonfire on the spare piece of land in front of our bungalow. On bonfire night all the community

and some villagers would congregate around the fire and bring their fireworks for all to see.

In winter – when we had snow – bigger children would clear the snow for the more elderly in the camp.

All around us were deep woods, which made another big play area for us, in spring these would be full of bluebells and snowdrops. But a lot of good hiding places for ‘Cowboys and Indians’. Following the road around the woods you came upon all the buildings that were used in the war – now known as Area H – good places for roller skating and exploring, at the very end of the road was a large wall, where we would find bullet shells – this we affectionately called the ‘bullet dump’. We were able to walk to the back of Holmewood Hall and gaze at the splendid and wonder what it was like inside, even then it seemed like a mystery building.

Back in the camp, across the road from our bungalow was a little road leading to a small pond where we would catch tadpoles and newts, we would always put them back, but we would spend hours with our jam jars catching them. Across from the pond was a large waste area with huge Horse Chestnut trees, another area for us kids to play, collect conkers and climb the trees if you were brave enough. Another relic from the American occupation was a huge white barrel, this again was a fascination for us and another place to play and use our imagination as to what it was used for in the war.

Finally in the corner opposite the shop some people kept a pig, the small potatoes dug up out of the gardens were usually boiled in a big pot in one of the bungalows, as kids and always hungry, we would wait until they were cooling and pick the skins off them and munch away, the taste was like nothing else, needless to say the pigs were hard done by as we ate them by the dozen.

Growing up beyond the camp

As we grew older and were allowed to venture further afield, a field opposite the entrance of the camp was a big playground, if you could avoid the horse that was sometimes put in the field. The field was pasture and had cowslips, wild flowers and mushrooms growing in it. There was a big pond in the middle, which we kept well away from; at the bottom of the field was the brook which ran through Holme and beyond that the Airfield. In summer this was a great place for picnics, quickly made jam or sugar sandwiches were made by mums for us kids to take to the field.

At the entrance to the field was a big wooden gate, just right for climbing and sitting on, car spotting was another activity, mind you the cars were few and far between. Further down the lane (the B660 running towards the A1) was a big white gate, an entrance to the woods, this was another meeting point, and a place of fascination as to where the path went. Walking further along the lane there were two lay-bys on each side of the road, on the left, it was an entrance to a strip of waste ground with a concrete road through it and at the bottom you came across the brook again, and at this point you could get down to it and paddle. On the waste ground there were remnants of the Airfield again, good for fun and games. We used to be out all day exploring and playing, our bellies used to tell us when it was time to go home for tea.

Both of my grandparents lived at the opposite end of the village, but visiting them both was always an adventure. One Gran lived near the railway – we are talking steam trains here – and the railway yard was full of buildings and hidey places, if we didn't get caught! It was nothing to play on the tracks behind the house looking out for the trains either going off to Peterborough or London. We would sit on the fence waving to the engine drivers and passengers (a touch of the railway children). There was a bridge over the tracks near the Station where we would go for train number spotting and standing on the top when the trains went under, disappearing in the smoke. My other Grandparents

lived in Pig and Whistle yard, which ran down beside the then Railway Arms public house.

At the entrance to the yard was a pond full of goldfish, their house was tiny and always smelling of my Grandads pipe.

We would walk everywhere, as we did not have cars, always finding apples to scrump and have lots of fun. A field in Short Drove used to flood, especially in winter and freeze over making a skating rink for the brave to skate on. I remember our dog once fell through the ice and we spent a long time fretting to see if she would get out, which she did in the end.

When I was about 10 they started to build the Council houses that you see today, and gradually one by one the Nissan hut dwellers moved into them and the huts pulled down, gradually the big circle turned into a big round grassy green, ready for the next generation to play on.

### School days

Holme C of E School, situated opposite the church, was originally 3 classrooms attached to the school house, which was occupied by the Head Master. The big classroom was usually split into two by a partition, one space for the infants and the other for junior 1, another room for junior 2 and a small one for seniors. There was not a canteen so lunchtime meant forming lines of two – making sure you held hands – and walking down to the Reading Room, half-way down Church Street, come rain or shine.

The infant teacher was Mrs Fear, who lived in the Station House, a very matronly figure and very strict, it was usually a slipper on the back of the legs if you had committed some naughty prank. But I can still remember the stories she read to us about rabbits and other little animals.

Moving up to the juniors was a big step and another activity we used to do to help us with maths was to make cars out of card. We had to measure the shapes and cut them out, folding with care and lots of glue you ended up with a car or lorry, mine were always a bit wonky, to this day I cannot cut in a straight line! During this time an extension was being built onto the original building, this housed a staff room, inside toilets – a luxury - a school canteen – no more walking in the rain – and 2 more classrooms for the seniors and Junior 2 to move into. No cooking was done in the canteen, but the food delivered by car and kept heated in the ovens, its arrival being announced by beeping of the horn, which meant 2 ‘big’ boys, would go and help the dinner ladies – of which my mum was one - to unload the car, the same process would exist for the milk run.

Some school meals were nice, but to this day I can’t abide lumpy custard, lumpy potatoes or fish in parsley sauce.

Moving into the seniors was another big step, bringing with it cooking for the girls and woodwork for the boys. For this activity the old school bus would pick us up on the appropriate day and take us to Stibbington, on the A1 about 8 miles away, returning with our proud offerings to our parents later that day. We were introduced to swimming also by catching the same rickety bus and being taken to the Peterborough Lido, come rain or shine. It was decided to build a pool at the School of which I had the pleasure of opening by jumping in it when it was finished, unheated!

In winter when it was snow and ice the bigger boys would make a big slippery slide along one side of the playground which they controlled who was allowed to go on it, they usually kept the girls off it, but we would have a sneaky go when they were not there. In Autumn playing conkers was another activity (not allowed now!) in the playground, we lived near some big Horse Chestnut trees so we got a good supply. In the summer there was always sports day, when mums and dads would come and watch the egg and spoon, sack races and the obstacle course to

name a few, and of course we loved to watch our mum's in their race at the end of the day.

The Sawtry College at this time was being built and when I left Holme School, it was converted to a Primary school, when reaching the age of 11 the children would go to Sawtry.

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