

A Wartime Move to Alfold Village in 1941



*An Account by a policeman's wife
Mrs. Sybil J Ponsford
1913 – 2006*

Sometime before I married, I weighed up in my mind the possibilities of living in a Police House miles from anywhere in a country district of Surrey, so when, after three years of married life in fairly busy towns we received orders to move to a place named "Alfold" about 12 miles from Guildford on the way to Horsham in Sussex, I felt we must surely be going to the most out of the way place imaginable.

It was on the 21st January 1941 that we heard of our move, after being stationed at Egham for just one year. A year that was more or less a nightmare of guns, bombs, shrapnel and air raid sirens; for although Egham was considered an evacuation area, it received more than its share of bombs of all types and sizes. Only a fortnight before we left, a bomb weighing 100 pounds actually fell within 150 yards of our house, killing 8 people and injuring many more.

It was with mixed feelings that I received the news of our removal, feelings sometimes of relief to get away from all the noise and misery, and at other times of doubt and loneliness at starting life afresh in a place that was probably miles from anywhere. However my feelings of doubt never materialized, for in moving to Alfold we found the prettiest, friendliest, and most interesting village imaginable so it is with feelings of happiness, interest and sentiment that I sit down to write about my life there.

They eventually arrived at nine owing to blackout conditions and for the next two hours we were making excursions back and forwards to the removal van until 10.45am when we were ready to start our journey. We then stoked up the fire in readiness for the next tenants and taking a last look round to see that nothing was left behind we made our way towards the van.

Suddenly there was a terrific roar of an aeroplane, followed by seven or eight dull thuds, which made us all dart back into the house for a while. We later learned that a German bomber had taken advantage of the low cloud and bad visibility and dropped several bombs the other side of the river, fortunately doing no damage and hurting nobody. However, this made me more eager to get away from Egham and for the first time I was really thankful to be going to the country.

Our journey of around 20 miles was cold and uneventful and after passing through Guildford, seemed to be nothing but snow clad fields with an occasional farmhouse here and there. As we neared our destination the sky grew darker and darker and the sleet turned to a blizzard it was certainly the most miserable day to be moving and we were all more than pleased when we drew up outside our house at 1.30pm.



Alfold Police House 1941

From the outside our house had almost the appearance of a dolls house, red brick, double fronted, with a chimney stack each end, if anything, rather plain, but it was the inside that mattered most. After glancing at the outside from all angles, we entered by the front door to take our first look round.

The front door opened into a small hall with the stairs running up the middle and a room on either side, the larger being the dining room, which went the whole length of the house with a window each end. It was in this room that we found a nice fire and decided to make a cup of tea before unpacking, however it did not prove that easy as to make tea we had to have a kettle and nobody could remember just what it was packed in so the hunt started. Of course, as is usual in such cases it was the last thing we came to but luckily we found it with the cups and saucers so saved a lot more hunting.

The fun started when we came to cook some potatoes to go with some cold meat we had brought with us. We found that the fire was our only means of cooking, having a trivet and oven attached – how I missed my gas stove in those first few weeks nobody knows. Eventually our potatoes cooked and we sat down to our somewhat uninteresting dinner.

Then came the task of straightening things out, the first job being curtains for by this time it was snowing hard and looked like being dark early. And we were not sure about our blackout curtains fitting, luckily they did so that job proved satisfactory. The rest of the day simple flew and as we had only blacked out our bedroom and dining room we had to concentrate on straightening these two rooms during the evening. We had had a long tiring day and it was a relief when at 8 o'clock that evening we sat down to talk things over. Our cat "Woo" had caused us a lot of bother before leaving Egham by biting his way through the box we put him in so he ended up coming in a sack.

Since our arrival he had done nothing but cry and remained nervous for several days after but then got more used to his surroundings and settled down.

It seemed very strange that first night, so quiet after the sirens and guns and even more strange to go upstairs to bed again after so many months sleeping downstairs and I can honestly say that I had my first really good night's sleep for quite three months.

Next morning we awoke refreshed and ready for another busy day, even the weather had changed for the better and as we took down the blackout a lovely red sunrise greeted us and made the whole aspect look different. From that moment on I started to see the beauty of the countryside where we were to make our home.

During the first few days we had so much to do that the days seemed far too short for us. Tradesmen called, our neighbour, a schoolteacher made her acquaintance, and a policeman friend from Cranleigh called on us. Apart from occasional callers and phone calls so it was nearly a week before we had time to pause and look around.

The village was half a mile further down our road and although I was astounded by its smallness I was at the same time thrilled with its quaintness and beautiful surroundings. From our house to the village you passed the school, a typical country school, with the headmasters house adjoining and trees in the playground. Apart from this and one or two houses there were only fields until you reached the actual village which consisted of two general shops, a butchers, a church, a public house with a few old fashioned cottages in between. They were situated on the slope of the hill giving a lovely view of the surrounding countryside and distant downs; never will I forget those snowcapped hills and glistening fields as I saw them for the first time.

The church nestled among the trees at the bottom of the hill, just like a picture on a Christmas card.

The general shops were well stacked and seemed to sell everything from a candle to a man's suit, the type of old fashioned shop that smelled of oil and bundles of firewood but at the same time felt warm and clean. The butchers was a quaint little place, a bow window and a stable door and inside instead of the modern counters one sees, there were huge chopping blocks and here again there seemed to be plenty of stock.

The Public House known as "The Crown" was owned by an ex-policeman, an old fashioned low building that toned with the rest of the village.

No doubt in peace time had a good trade with hikers and people touring the countryside, but in these days of war was now frequented only by the regular villagers and occasional evacuees. We were very amused when we learned the names of our tradesmen for they were "Biggs" "Budd" and "Burst", unusual names but very fitting for a village such as Alfold.

After several days of bright, sunny weather we decided to look round the garden as up to now there had been snow and slush everywhere. The sun of the last few days had melted all signs of snow and looking around observed fresh green shoots showing at intervals through the heavy clay soil. Already I had been told of the primroses that grew everywhere in this district and being a great lover of these I scoured our garden for any trace of them. I was so pleased when I found some on the bank in front of the house. That very afternoon we started to tidy the flower beds and sweep the paths for it was a neatly laid out front garden with a wide lawn partly surrounded with flower beds with a green bank one end of hazel and honeysuckle.

The back garden was mostly kitchen garden, although immediately under the dining room window was a stretch of lawn with flower borders. These however had never been properly cultivated so we could foresee some real hard work before it would look anything like tidy.

It was during that afternoon that we made acquaintance of the person in the bungalow two doors away who approached me by asking if I would like to join the Savings Club that was collected along this road. I of course said “yes” and we then had a little chat about things in general.

A small thin, old fashioned little woman with a clean, wholesome and friendly look about her, she informed me that she lived with her mother and small daughter and that her own husband was dead, having been killed 2 years previously in a motor accident while returning from work.

I at once realized that in this person I had found a friend, she was eager to to do anything for us or help in any way. That same evening she came round with an oil stove for us so that we could boil our kettle quicker for up to now we had to get up to light the fire before any hot water could be obtained so what a blessing that stove was. I was also able to boil puddings and fry the breakfast with ease once more.

We had already made enquiries about an electric stove for we were fortunate in having electricity laid on so after a week or so we sent in a report to the Police on the subject and hoped for the best. By this time we had been for several cycle rides round about and were beginning to pick up a few names of lanes and farms etc: such as, “Wildwood Lane”, “Robins Farm”, “Withey Bush”, “Pound Farm”, “Park Farm”, and Rosemary Lane, such typical country names and so suitable.

All the farms were unspoiled by modern equipment and buildings and still retained the old houses low ceilings, raftered kitchens with their open fireplaces stone floors, and cats, chickens, pigs and ducks roaming about to their hearts content.

Most of the roads and lanes consisted of fields either side, with a copse of young hazel every now and then. This we were told was cut every three or four years and used for pea sticks, faggots etc, our baker had one of the old fashioned faggot ovens still in use which certainly baked delicious bread and sent out a refreshing odour of burning wood. He had bundles of these faggots stacked outside his bake house all the year round and must have used hundreds.

Already in these little woods and copses, you could see the green leaves of primroses and violets showing through the brown leaves of the previous autumn. Coltsfoot bloomed in profusion along the ditches and in the hedges while in the fields the winter oats looking fresh and green compared with the newly ploughed fields waiting for the spring sowing.

Towards the end of February my mother and sister paid us a visit, they were very taken with the house and district agreeing that it would be much nicer in the summer when we would be able to get about and meet people. Like me they found it very quiet after living so near to guns etc.

By this time our house was looking more like home as familiar things gradually got unpacked; somehow our furniture and carpets looked different in this house. I suppose it was the light paintwork and distempered walls, after the dark brown paintwork and wallpaper we had at Egham. Things looked brighter and the rooms more airy, as though we were living on the top of a hill.

In the garden I had discovered bulbs peeping through, scillas, tulips, daffodils, crocuses and grape hyacinth and a little of forsythia was breaking into flower. The lawns were extra green and the honeysuckle on the bank in the front garden was bursting into bud, everywhere signs that spring was rapidly approaching.

One night in March as I sat knitting and listening to the wireless, I heard one or two thuds in the distance followed shortly afterwards by voices and hurrying feet along the road. I switched off the wireless and went out into the brilliant moonlight to find the road alive with people, home guards, special constables and wardens etc.

Four bombs had been dropped down in the village. It was really remarkable where so many people had come from in such a short time and it was not long before a voice enquired if I was alright and would I like to come round to their house as I was alone until my husband came home. I was only too pleased to go with my new found friend as it had awakened my memories of earlier experiences of the bombs, so I went gladly, leaving a note for my husband to say where I had gone.

To say they made me welcome is putting it mildly, they were kindness itself, and I spent the happiest evening for months. We sat round the fire, the four of us, the mother, Mrs. Sopp, her daughter Norah and Granny, chatting and knitting as though we had known each other for years. Granny was a dear little old lady with white hair and always wore a clean, gay, apron and Norah was a quaint, dainty, aristocratic looking little girl with long hair and a pink and white complexion, very nicely spoken and well mannered. They made me a cup of cocoa and gave me a piece of cake and the time simply flew by, in fact we eventually went home at 12.30am and from that night I never felt lonely again.

The bombs luckily all fell in open fields and gardens except for one, which partially blocked the road to traffic for 2 days, no-one was hurt and the damaged road repaired. We learned later that the enemy plane had jettisoned his bombs whilst being attacked by one of our night fighters.

About this time we paid a visit to Pound Lea Farm and what an interesting time we had. We watched the cows being milked, gathered eggs from the chickens and fed the pigs. Every animal had a name and after several visits we got to know each cow, calf, horse and pig by its name. We spent some very happy days on this farm and were always able to get eggs and honey a plenty.

Adjoining the farm was a copse of young hazel and it was in this copse towards the end of March I picked the first primroses. They were coming through like a green carpet together with wood anemones, violets and milkmaids. When I next visited the farm after a few warm sunny days, the little wood had been transformed, the bare branches of the hazel had burst into fresh green leaves and primroses covered the ground like yellow velvet.

Springtime in Alfold is delightful, wild flowers grow everywhere in profusion, the ditches are full of milkmaids and bluebells and primroses on the banks like yellow stars. The cottage gardens too are a mass of bloom, wallflowers, snowdrops, forget-me-nots and crocuses while on the walls you can find jasmine, japonicas and fuchsias. Opposite our house was an orchard and at this time of the year when the trees were breaking into blossom, daffodils grew at random under the trees giving us a pretty outlook from our windows. We worked hard in our garden for every inch had to be dug before planting anything, however we spent every available moment getting it straight and many a night working until darkness stopped us, but it soon proved worth the trouble for our crops were most satisfactory.

Going to the top of our road toward the cross roads and turning sharp right along the Horsham road you came upon a most artistic 16th century tea rooms known as Gibbs Hatch Tea Barn. It was one of the most quaint and attractive places I had ever seen, the barn itself being the actual 16th century structure with crooked worm eaten beams and massive fireplaces, little lattice windows and uneven floors. There were tables seating two, four or six persons situated in little alcoves and nooks in a most attractive way. The tea they served was even more of an attraction for in these days of war one could have homemade scones, jam, cakes, bread and butter and tea all for the price of 1 shilling and 3 pence.

They also served lunches and suppers and the amazing part was that all cooking was done on oil stoves and primus ovens. The gardens belonging to Gibbs Hatch were lovely, flower beds dotted among green lawns, full of tulips, wallflowers and daffodils, sweet Williams, Canterbury bells and all kinds of flowering shrubs in the borders.

On the opposite side of the road they owned a small nursery selling, shrubs, rock plants, herbaceous plants and enough flowers to decorate the tables in the tea barn which always looked gay and cheerful.

Up to the middle of March we had not been able to visit our folks in Byfleet owing to the difficulty in traveling. There were only 3 buses a day to Guildford and the last one was too early to get a connection the other end so we were thrilled when a farmer offered us his car for the day which we gladly accepted. A month later we borrowed the car again and on the homeward journey from Byfleet, the back wheel came off, luckily no damage was done to us or the car.

Just before Easter, in fact on Good Friday, we bought a car of our own, a Ford 8, as it seemed the only possible way of getting any distance and the first people to ride in it was my sister-in-law and her friend who came to stay for a week in the Eater holidays.



Our New Car

That was a very pleasant week for all, we went for cycle rides and walks and picked dozens of bunches of primroses to send away and give to friends. My mother came also at the end of the week and even she climbed over the fence into the copse and sat and picked the primroses from all around her.

By this time our garden was well stocked with seeds, broad beans, peas, shallots, lettuce, parsnips, carrots, Swedes, onions, radishes, tomato plants and 17 rows of potatoes so with that good work done we could turn our attention to the front garden.

Most of the bulbs had flowered and now there were lupins, phlox, chrysants and heleniums making their appearance and down the borders to the front gate were thick with saxifrage and London pride.

Early in May we had a week's holiday so by saving our petrol a few weeks before hand we were able to have a nice week touring around the country. The first day out we went all round Ewhurst and Pitch Hill taking our tea with us and then we paid a visit home to Byfleet bringing back my father and mother-in-law for a few days. They were very happy days taking the old folks round as they loved the countryside and shared our enthusiasm for flowers and scenery. We took them round all our special places in the copses to pick primroses, gathering cowslips in the fields and around the farm yards and found birds' nests of many varieties.

After four days we took them home taking a route which took us through Albury and over Newlands Corner where we stopped to have dinner and admire the view. The following day we spent in a lazy way just pottering around in the garden and taking things easy after a week of rushing about. It was on the evening of this day, Friday May 9th 1941 that London had a bad blitz and we took a good toll of Hitler's planes, 33 were brought down in one night, a night of brilliant moonlight and a warm breeze.

At about 2.0am we were awakened by machine gun fire and a few seconds later the hum of a plane which became almost a scream as it nosedived toward the earth at a terrific speed. We were downstairs like a shot and when we opened the back door could see the enormous fire as the plane burned furiously with its ammunition spurting in all directions. As we watched the plane blew up flinging us into the kitchen with its blast.

The plane had fallen in a field at Witley Bush Corner, a Heinkel 111 with a full load of bombs on board, only one of the crew had managed to bail out and he was picked up at Loxwood about an hour later – that was one of the 33 planes brought down that night.

We finished our holiday by taking my friend Sally of Cranliegh to tea at Gibbs Hatch on the Sunday and after a short motor ride took her home and returned to our home well satisfied with our first week's holiday.

Author: Mrs. Sybil Ponsford 1913 – 2006
wife of
P.C. Edward (Ted) Ponsford 1912-1993

Written in long hand during WW2
© Copyright S E Ponsford 2010