

LIVING *history*

Bushey Hall, now demolished, played a crucial national role during World War II, as the HQ of the 8th USAAF Fighter Command, and as the main routing area for all the intelligence information coming into the UK. Today the site has a new function, as home of the Lincolnsfields Centre, a charitable trust established to provide social, educational, leisure and recreational experiences for children. Its 'evacuee experience' days and residential trips are thought to be unique.

Jill Glenn joins a group of local schoolchildren as they are transported back to World War II.

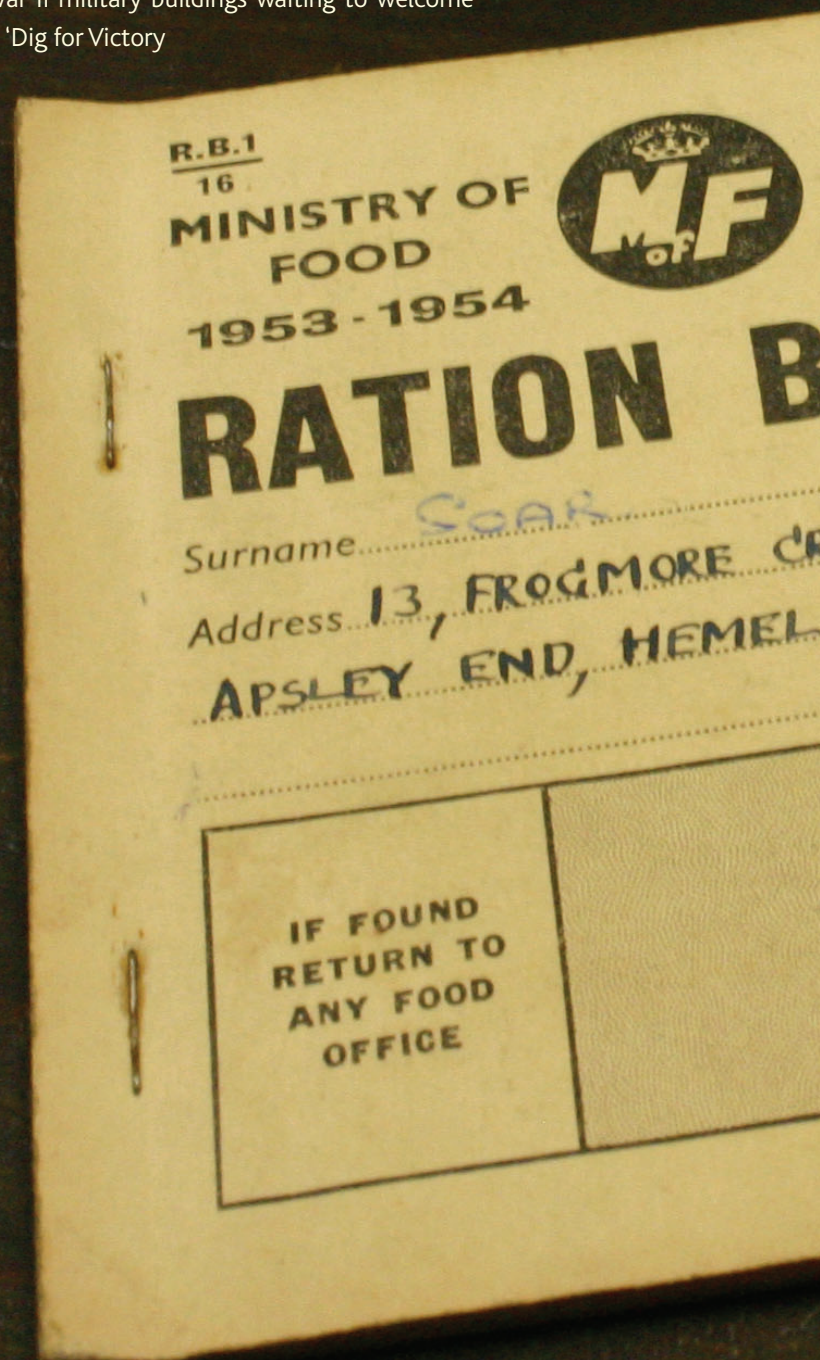
THEY STRAGGLE ALONG THE DRIVE in the January rain, bedraggled, looking every inch the group of evacuees they're supposed to represent. There are some dozen World War II military buildings waiting to welcome them (including a recreation of a 1940s house, a blitzed street, a 'Dig for Victory Garden' complete with Anderson Shelter, and a museum) but it is in one of the anonymous, modern rooms on the Lincolnsfields site that Year Six of Bournehall School, Bushey, begin time-travelling back to the early days of the war. There are some nervous giggles as Francis McLennan, the centre's manager, emerges – soberly dressed as a billeting officer – and begins to explain How To Behave In School in 1939. "Speak when you're spoken to..." he barks, and "be seen and not heard...". The children aren't quite sure what to make of it, but they opt – sensibly, I'd say – for taking him seriously. Despite the stern atmosphere he soon has them all involved in a broad overview of different aspects of the war, from why you need your identity card to the nature of propaganda.

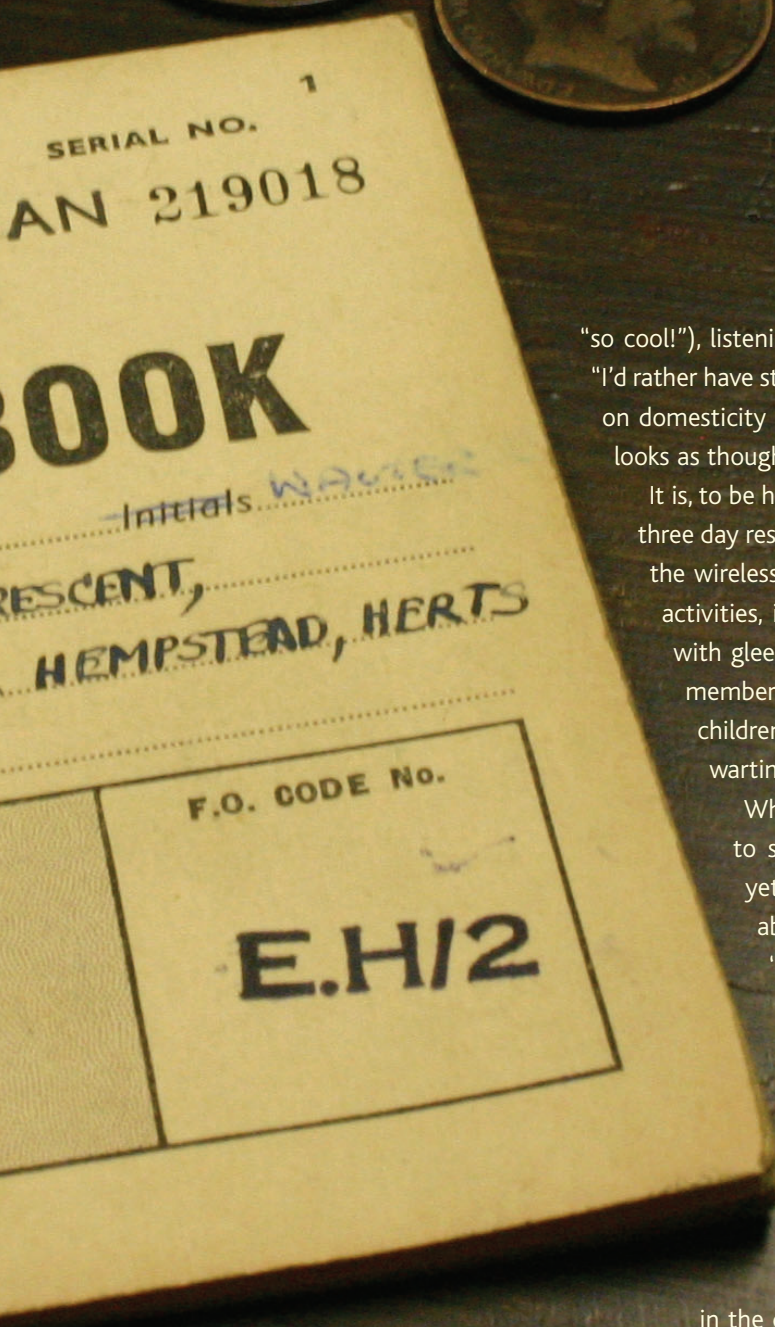
The class has clearly been well-drilled in advance of the visit. There are some intelligent answers to some probing questions, although a query about the role of the Land Girls causes them all, unaccountably, to falter; in the silence the voice of their teacher can clearly be heard hissing "Come on, you know this...". And, suddenly, they do. Hands go up, and accurate explanations are forthcoming.

Then the pupils are split into groups of six or seven, and whisked off to the past for the day's main activities. "Walking does not require talking" roars Mr McLennan, as 21st century enthusiasm momentarily gets the better of our would-be war children.

First stop for 'my' group is the classroom, and a rapid lesson in 'old' money. They're given a shilling paypacket each, to empty out on the desk, and talked through what they could buy with it – how much it costs at the cinema, for example, and the price of a bus fare. There's a lot of reasoning to be done – why people took buses rather than cars, say – and the youngsters fathom out the answers with ease. I sit at the back, tucking my knees under the old-fashioned wooden desk, and suppress the urge to put up my hand too.

The 1940s house generates huge enthusiasm. It's messy and





cluttered and full of authentic gear. The bedroom reeks of mothballs, expertly identified by a youngster who confides that it smells “just like my grandma’s house”. The girls all accept an invitation to help with the laundry (describing the mangle as “so cool!”), listening to instructions diligently, taking the whole thing very seriously. “I’d rather have stayed with a wealthy family,” observes one, less enchanted by hands-on domesticity than her classmates – although she grumbles nonetheless when it looks as though she might not get a turn.

It is, to be honest, a bit of a rush to fit everything in to just a few hours. On the three day residential trip there’s more time – with the evenings spent listening to the wireless and playing board games – but despite the constant curtailing of activities, it’s evident that the children love it, and are absorbing its lessons with glee. “I never thought you’d get Year Six playing shops,” observes one member of staff... but the minute they’re ushered into the 1940s ‘shop’ the children are weighing, measuring, buying and selling, and examining the wartime goods with critical interest.

When the groups meet at lunchtime they’re falling over themselves to share their experiences with each other... “Have you fed the pigs yet?...” “Have you been in the air-raid shelter?...” They’re all excited about the bumpy trip in the 1942 Jeep that takes them to a bombed ‘street’, complete with blown-up outside toilet and piercing siren. They sit in the shelter, damp and shivering, several clearly afraid of the dark, and imagine the fear they would be feeling if this were for real. “I’d sooner have been on an underground station,” says one, “because people could keep their hopes up better there.”

It seems almost redundant to ask Year Six if they’ve enjoyed themselves. It strikes me that today will be a day they’ll remember for a long time – fun, frightening in parts and very full-on; a fabulous back-up to the work they’ve already done in the classroom. I ask them their opinion, anyway, and one ten-year old

sums it up. “Well...”, she says, thoughtfully, “when you do it at school you have to write it all down, but here... here you’re living it.” ■