

Based on extracts from 'Percy Jackson's: A History of the Percy Jackson Grammar School'.

## Percy Jackson's & World War II 1939-1945

A number of male teachers including Mr Belton (art and woodwork), Mr Milson (maths and senior master) and Mr Emmott (history and scripture) were drafted into the forces during the war years. (BF, RJ) The three mentioned teachers returned to the school after demobilisation, but did not remain for long. Mr Lesley Belton (RAF pilot) was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) in February 1945.



Pilot Officer Lesley Belton



Distinguished Flying Cross

During the war all boys became eligible for conscription on reaching their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. After the War they were obliged to serve two years of National Service. Under certain conditions military service could be deferred until after college or university. Thus, for example, our later physics teacher, Alan Dixon, took a concentrated degree course at Birmingham University before joining the army. From September 1942 to June 1944 he was required to study every weekday from 9 to 5 and Saturdays 9 to 12. All spare time and the summer break were taken up with Senior Training Corps (military) activities. He then went into the army on war service and was demobbed in the rank of captain in December 1947. National Service ended in 1958 and boys born from 1940 onwards were not required to register.

Alan Dixon joined the school staff in September 1949, the same time as did other ex-servicemen Ron Cockroft (physical education & games) and Arthur 'Mac' McCrystal (Latin, French), to be followed in 1953 by Glyn Court (German, French). Both Mac and Glyn faced the Japanese in Burma and Mac was severely wounded. Glyn took part in some of the famous river battles in Burma, including the Battle of Sittang Bend, 26-27 July 1945, the last action fought by a British battalion in WW2.

Ron Cockroft saw war service from 1939 to 1946. He was commissioned in June 1940 as an officer in the Royal Armoured Corps. During 1944-45 his unit of Churchill tanks advanced from Normandy across the Rhine to the Ruhr. He was awarded the Military Cross in France in June 1944 and was demobbed in April 1946 in the rank of major. His unit formed the guard at the signing of the preliminary armistice on Lüneburg Heath. A "Boys' Own" hero. He died age 99 in 2018.



Capt Ron Cockroft 1944



Military Cross

Whilst the War depleted the school of some teachers, conversely it managed to provide a new male teacher in the person of Dr Michael Tennenhaus, a Jewish fugitive from Austria. After fleeing the Continent he served two years in the British Pioneer Corps before joining Percy Jackson's as a teacher of German in 1943. He left for a teaching post in London in 1955.



Dr Michael Tennenhaus, Pioneer Corps, 1940.

In the middle of the War it became apparent that the nation needed more coal and from December 1943 until the end of the War ten percent of conscripts were sent to work in the mines as "Bevin Boys", many in the Doncaster area. Notable Bevin Boys from the north of England included comedian Eric Morecambe, actor Lord Brian Rix and broadcaster Jimmy Saville, who said about his experience: "I went down as a boy and came up as a man."

One former pupil reports (to IMN) that the school was camouflaged during the War, but a more likely explanation is that it may have appeared that way because building work went unfinished. Air-raid shelters were built at the front of the school, across the drive from the main entrance and the headmaster's office. The area between the drive and the shelters was developed as a rose garden.



Air raid shelters opposite the school frontage

The government was much concerned about gas attacks and everyone was issued with a carbon-filtered gas-mask which we carried with us everywhere. Many of us took to personalised decorating of the containers, but after a couple of years we left them at home or used them as sandwich boxes. (RJ)



Gas Mask of WW2

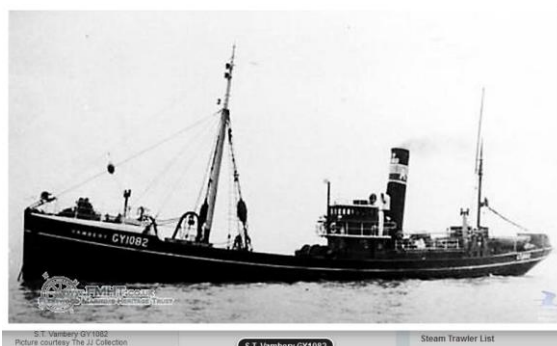
There were regular air-raid practices when pupils with their gasmasks would file into the air-raid shelters. Fortunately the shelters were never used in earnest. (EO) Doris Marks (1939 entry) recalls that as the school numbers grew the shelters became too small and parents could opt for children to stay in the cloakrooms instead.

As building work continued on the first floor, lessons were frequently interrupted by noise from above. Betty Oates recalls a builder going up a ladder outside her classroom window carrying a hod of bricks on which was painted “Graf Spee” – the first major enemy ship to be sunk in the war. (EO)

Miss Fell organised the adoption of the minesweeper ST ‘Saronta’ and “We girls used to knit sea-boot stockings and jerseys. We liked to think there was a romance between her and the ship’s captain!” (DOM) As the oiled wool was so heavy, jerseys were knitted in sections, e.g. a back or a front or a sleeve. (KRG) A couple of boys joined the knitting group - probably because they fancied Miss Fell - and managed to produce stockings which didn’t match in size. (MPJ)

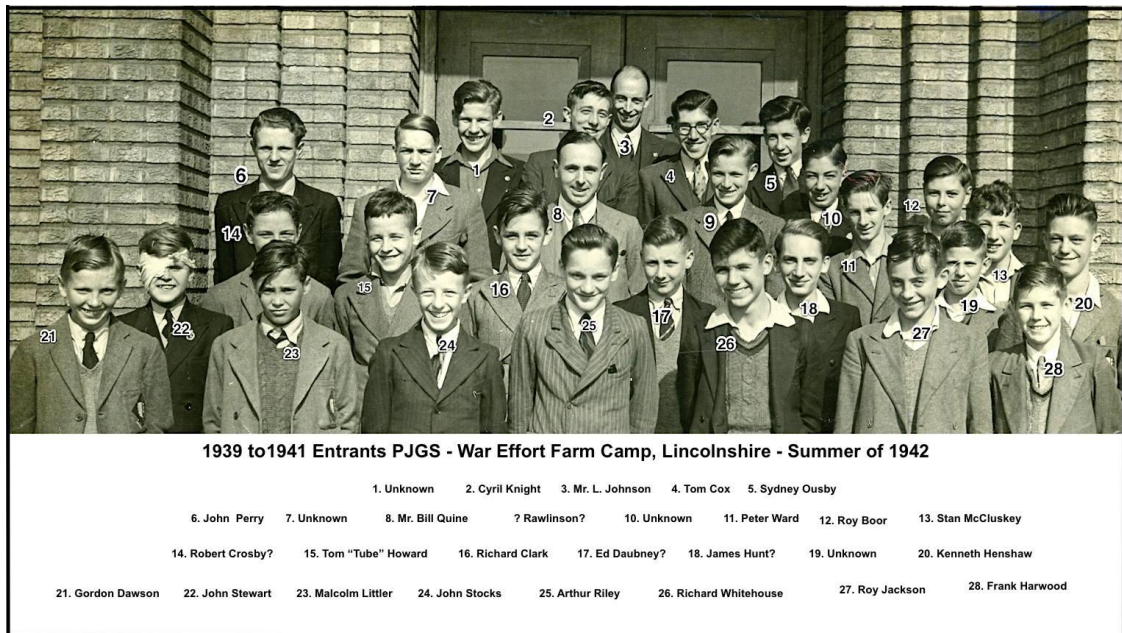


World War 2: Crew of Minesweeper ST ‘Saronta’



As part of their contribution to the war effort, which continued in fact for a couple of years after the war was over, volunteer pupils were dispatched to camps in the summer holidays for two weeks to work on farms. The girls went to Essex and to Somersham, near Huntingdon, picking fruit – mostly plums and apples (BF, EO, KG) - whilst the boys went to Lincolnshire picking potatoes, singling turnips and stooking barley. (WDB, RJ) Teachers Johnson and Quine even cooked at these camps and their elderberry and apple pie is fondly recalled by Roy

Jackson, as are the boys' bicycle trips into Kirton Lindsey to replenish stocks of cider and currant buns.



Also working at these camps were German and Italian prisoners of war: "Content to be out of the firing lines and within sight of the land-girls," says Roy Jackson. A German prisoner reproached the Percy boys one day when they were fooling about, lobbing spuds at each other: "Unless you verk harder, you vill neffer vin zis vorr."

On the 1947 camp the girls were treated to a trip to Cambridge – "what a difference from our home area!" (DOM) It was at one of these camps that the girls happened to see Miss Olga Gray in her dressing gown and realised that her hair bun was fashioned from two long plaits.



Part of the school field was ploughed up and planted to food crops. Even after the War pupils went potato picking in the grounds in the late summer. (JH) The first week of August 1948 was spent by thirty two older boys in the charge of Mr Horsfield and Mr Hanmer at a “Harvest Camp” at Blyborough near Gainsborough. They were billeted in the old rectory there and picked potatoes and peas and stooked corn. (SM 1949)

## Percy Jackson’s Hosts Evacuee Pupils

For four years (1940-44), boys of the **Riley High School in Hull** shared the school premises. (SR) They had been evacuated from the East Riding and were billeted with local families. The new school was only just starting to build up its roll numbers, so there was spare classroom capacity for the visitors. Our later physics teacher, Alan Dixon, whilst a pupil at Maltby Grammar School, recalls a Saturday morning football fixture at Percy’s against the Hull Boys in the winter of 1941-42. “We won rather easily,” is his recollection.

A letter from the Hull school (24 August 1940) indicates an original plan for 167 boys: 55 from Bridlington, 67 from Selby and 40 “to be announced later”. (SR) Norman Staveley, one of these Hull boys, explains (May 2005) that this was because they had already been previously evacuated in separate groups to Bridlington and Selby.

Other letters mention plans to billet the evacuees as: 33 in Askern, 14 in Burghwallis, 20 in Scawthorpe and 55 in the Barnsley Road area, which amounts to 122 pupils. Norman Staveley and a colleague, Charles Oxley, were billeted with the Manning family at “Mayfield” a mile from the water tower down Green Lane. He reports that, at the time of the May 1941 blitz, the glow from the flames of Hull could be seen from the Mannings’ house – the A1 junction with Green Lane being quite a vantage point overlooking the lower Don Valley towards the Humber estuary. (NSS)

Skellow boys remember they saw and heard the bombing over Sheffield and Rotherham and on one occasion the jettison of German bombs over Bentley. (RJ) The roar of take-off and the cruising drone of the Halifax and Lancaster bombers from airfields around Doncaster - Finningley, Lindholme, Dunnington - became familiar to us all.



Big bombers: Avro Lancaster (top + Spitfire) and Handley-Page Halifax

School records show the Hull boys were issued with 6381 dinner tickets in the autumn term of 1941, sufficient for around a hundred boys. In April 1943 they were recorded as 60 boys and four staff but by May 1944 it was expected that there would be only seven boys starting the autumn term and the redundancy of one of their staff, science teacher Mr Drinkall, was proposed. Judging by the thankyou letter from the Hull head (25 July 1944), it had been decided by the close of that summer term to repatriate all pupils and staff. (SR/IMN)

There is one report that the Hull boys started and finished the school day at different times from the Piglets. (BF) They occupied some of the first floor classrooms and used the lecture theatre as their assembly hall. Percy's pupils retained the use of the library, at the middle of the front wing on the first floor. The Hull boys had their own teachers and had a separate curriculum from Percy Jackson's. (SR) This would explain Bill Bishop's observations "...they seemed to occupy some of the upstairs classrooms. For whatever reason, there seemed to be a strict segregation of the visitors from the residents". (WDB) Gwen (North) Oakland, who did not attend PJGS, has memories of "scuffles and scraps" breaking out between Hull boys and Percy's boys!

Riley High School masters at Percy's included: Dawson (chemistry), Drinkall (physics), Lucas (German), Forrest (English), Magee (maths) and Graystone, headmaster. (NSS) The last seven Hull boys at Percy's are recorded as receiving their School Certificates in the prize-giving programme of 26 October 1944: W S Pawson, N S Staveley, F E Wilkinson, G L Burkitt, P C Garbutt, J C MacDonald and C W Oxley – although, being back in Hull, none of them attended the prize-giving.

One of the Hull boys, Ken Shepherdson, recorded his memories of the evacuation years in a memoir, an extract of which, relating to his stay in Doncaster, can be found at the head of Chapter 5: "Anecdotes". Another boy from Hull, Michael Cannon, was sent privately to stay with an uncle and aunt and attended mainstream Percy Jackson's. He was there from the school's opening on 9 October 1939 and stayed for two years.

School records show that Percy Jackson's also accommodated evacuee children from Kent, London and Middlesex although these pupils were incorporated into the main school. David Cranshaw remembers a Jewish boy from Germany, Johannes Schuster, who stayed for a few months before moving on with his family to the USA. Whilst English was a foreign tongue to him, he apparently got better marks in English Language than most of his classmates! (DC) Johannes never did understand why he was called "Fritz" by his schoolmates. (RJ)

Through the Kindertransport arrangement, another Jewish boy arrived and spent ten months at the school during 1939-40. This was Siegfried Franz Spira, later to become well-known in the USA as **Fred Spira**. In June 1940 he left with his father for the States where they were reunited with his mother. Fred later established a successful business, 'Spiratone', dealing in photographic equipment and was one of the first people in the States to recognise the quality of Japanese optical products. He made a substantial collection of historic photographic items and with his son, Jonathan Spira, he published in 2001 the acclaimed "The History of Photography as seen through the Spira Collection". Fred Spira died at the age of 83 on 2 September 2007.



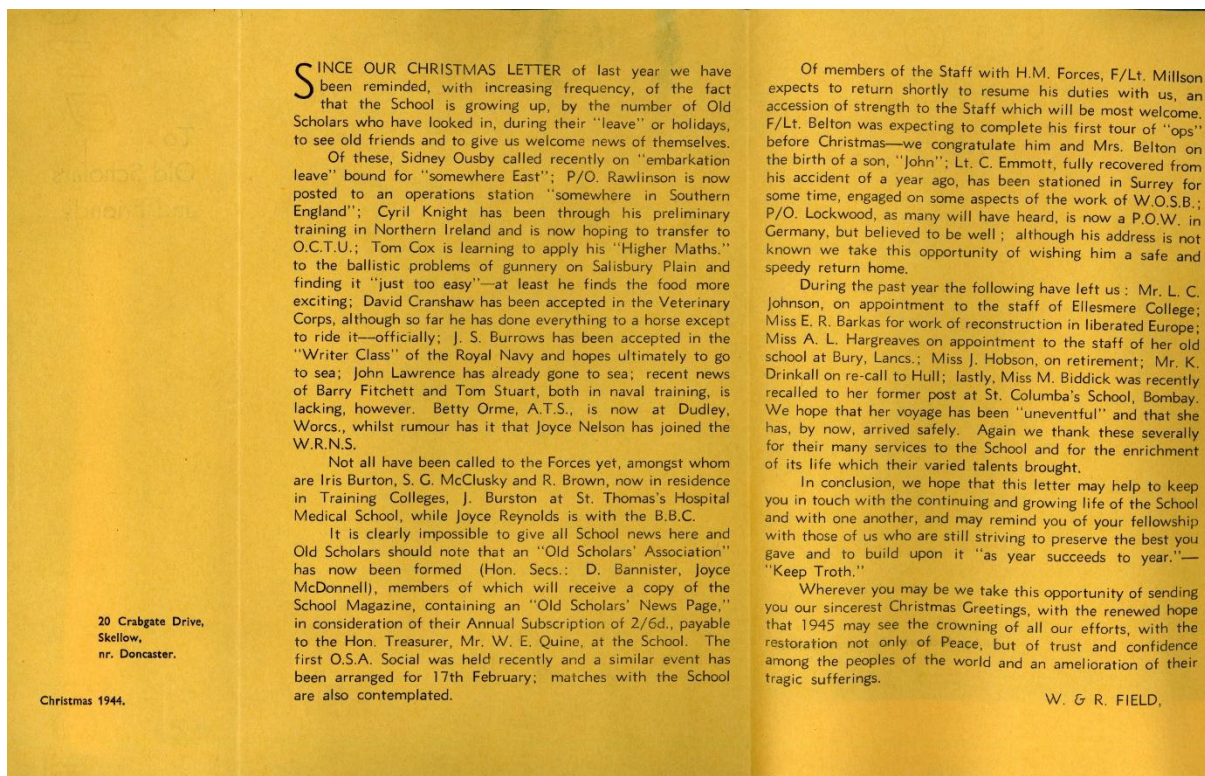
Kindertransport: an arrival at London

As token examples of evacuee movements in Doncaster, here are two snippets from the *Doncaster Chronicle*:

**Thursday 30 July 1944:** "The number of evacuees received at Doncaster since last Saturday week has not been far short of three thousand."

**Thursday 31 May 1945:** "**London Evacuees Leave:** The first train under official auspices to take evacuees back to London from Doncaster and the surrounding areas will leave Doncaster on Tuesday. It will convey 400 mothers and children. Ninety of the party will be from the town area and the rest from the Rural District and from Adwick, Bentley, Goole and Thorne. Children who are unaccompanied will go about a week later. The Doncaster WVS has arranged an escort of ten for the party on Tuesday."

Many families of Percy pupils hosted evacuees, mostly children but also mothers with children. (IMN)



Headmaster's Christmas Letter 1944.

## BOYS KNIT SCARVES FOR FORCES

### Activities of Adwick Grammar School

#### NATIONAL SAVINGS GROUP FORMED

Girls at the Percy Jackson Grammar School at Adwick, anxious to do "their bit" for the country, started knitting scarves and helmets for the Forces. The boys of the school kept a watchful eye on the garments, took a keen interest in the little band of knitters, and finally decided to join them and try their hand, too.

Now they are as enthusiastic as the girls; they knit scarves—they're easier than socks or mittens—in their spare time. The scholars are under the supervision of the senior mistress (Miss H. Todd), and they have now sent their first consignment of knitted articles to the Forces.

The governors have approved the design of the school badge and the school motto. The badge consists of a shield with red and white stripes and three Yorkshire roses—thus perpetuating the connection of the Washington family with Adwick. The motto is "Keep Troth." The idea behind it is that in these days of broken faith it is considered a fine thing to adopt such a motto.

The school has formed a National Savings group, which is making capital progress, and the 86 scholars are at present saving an average of £2 12s. a week. Mr. V. Millson is the hon. secretary of the group.

#### School Scout Troop

The school is also contemplating the formation of a scout troop, and at a meeting of the scholars last Friday it was decided that the Headmaster (Mr. R. Field), a scoutmaster with many years' experience, should take charge.

The governors are considering ploughing up about two acres of the school playing field—which is not at present needed for games—and cultivating potatoes and vegetables for use in the school kitchen. The scholars, too, are to have a small kitchen garden.

Thurs: SEPT. 10<sup>th</sup> 1942.

## Grammar School Boys' Farming Camp

### An Invigorating And Helpful Holiday

Twenty-six boys from the Percy Jackson Grammar School, Adwick-le-Street, recently returned from a school camp on the Stenigot Estate, Lincolnshire, where they have been helping in farm work. The camp was arranged and organised by Mr. Johnson and Mr. Quine—two members of the staff—and the boys were aged from 14 to 17. The estate is about 20 miles from the coast.

One of the boys has written the following account of their experiences:

The living quarters consisted of a large barn provided with two stoves and electric light. The bounds to which we were allowed to wander were almost unlimited, as the farm was one of many hundred acres.

By evening we were comfortably settled. On the following morning everyone was up at 6 a.m. and work started at 8 a.m. Working hours were from 8 a.m. to 11.30 a.m., when an hour was taken for dinner, after which work went on until 4 p.m. As our abilities differed, the work was divided into two sections. Lighter work was done by the younger boys, and the older ones did the heavier jobs.

The first section included the singling of turnips, weeding kale, and generally helping the regular farm hands with cutting, binding, and

stooking of wheat. The harder jobs included threshing, loading carts with sheaves of barley or wheat, and emptying baskets of potatoes into carts after the pickers had filled them.

Although both sections of the work were sometimes hard, and we became tired, the hours at work were not long, and a rule of the camp was "early to bed, early to rise."

The outstanding assets of the camp were the eating and sleeping arrangements. No-one could have wished for better beds both for comfort and warmth. The food was excellent, especially the hot meal which was always ready at 5 p.m., after the day's work.

All the meals were prepared by the two members of the staff with the help of two orderlies chosen from among us each night.

The financial position was also very pleasing. Not only did the money earned by us pay for the large amount of food which we ate, but it left a surplus amounting to 10s. per head.

Another reason for success was the attitude of the villagers and farm hands. All the local inhabitants were most sociable and helpful, which was a valuable contribution to the smooth running of the camp.

The holiday at the camp was a great success, both for the farmer and us. Everyone present had a thoroughly enjoyable time, and many of us are already looking forward to a similar camp next year.

See also Ron Cockcroft's War Story.