

# Ely Then and Now

## 1939-2020

Read this account from Doris. She was a child from London who was evacuated to Ely during WW2 to keep her safe. Museums and historians often read personal accounts like this one to learn about history. When Doris talks about Ely and her life, what differences do you notice, compared with today?

On Friday the first of September, 1939, children were being evacuated from London, as war was inevitable. My brother, sister and I had to meet at my school in Spital Square with all of the other children who were being evacuated. After our names were checked, we were lined up in double file and walked to the station, which was not very far away. We were all dressed up, carrying our luggage in suitcases or bags, with named labels pinned to our coats and gasmasks draped over our shoulders.

When we got to the station there were other children from different schools who were also being evacuated. We were not all going to the same place. Eventually we boarded a train and set off; - for who knows where? Mums and Dads and other members of families were there to see us off and it was a sad scene with lots of them crying and wondering if we would see one another again.

We only travelled for about two hours and ended up at Ely station. We got off the train and were taken to a room where we were going to be billeted out. Being three together we were the last ones to be picked., but in the end it turned out alright as the people had two boys and a girl of their own. So there were six children altogether. The actual dwelling turned out to be a Men's club, with a snooker table, cards etc.

On Sunday the third of September WAR was declared at 11 o'clock and not long after, the wailing siren sounded for an air raid; - but nothing happened.

After a month of going to Ely High School, part time, I had word that my Grandmother had died. She was about seventy years old. . Seeing that I lived with her, I went back to London to attend the funeral. A month or so before Christmas, we all moved, with the foster parents, from the Club to a flat over a grocer's shop in the main street. There wasn't any television in those days so we did knitting in the evenings; my sister used to bring wool home from school and we knitted mittens for the soldiers.

There wasn't any bombing while we were at Ely. It was a very cold winter, so much so that the river froze over and we all went skating. I was not very good, I couldn't stand the cold. I got friendly with a girl whose parents owned a café. One Sunday we cycled to Cambridge. It took me all of my time as I hadn't ridden a bike very much. When we got back, my friend made egg and chips for us in the café, which we both enjoyed. Another time the foster parent took us by car to an orchard, the first one that I have seen. We had a lovely time, picking apples and tasting the different varieties.

On Sunday mornings the foster husband used to cook a fried breakfast. Food was not scarce at that time, rationing had not started as far as I can remember. Money was scarce with us children; the baker's shop had lovely cakes in the window, but that was where they stayed as far as we were concerned.

There was a corn exchange at Ely but it was closed during the war. There was a beautiful cathedral there. We lived in the High street adjacent to the Cathedral. While at Ely, my Mum and Dad, Aunt and Uncle came to visit us. By then we were living over the grocers. We spent most of the time chatting but managed to take some photos out in the street.

I have not been back to Ely since the War and prefer to remember it how it was.

Story from: *Evacuation to Ely* by Rossalie <https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/12/a3895112.shtml>  
WW2 People's War is an online archive of wartime memories contributed by members of the public and gathered by the BBC. The archive can be found at [bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar](http://bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar)

## What did you learn from Doris's memories?

Did you notice any differences compared to the modern day?

Here are some examples you might have noticed.

Doris left London two days before the war started. She came by train. She had her suitcase, gas mask and a label pinned to her coat. This was all she was allowed to bring.

Doris would not have been alone on Friday the first of September 1939. 751 children arrived in the morning with another 959 arriving that evening.

Homes for all these children had to be found. They would live with people in Ely and the surrounding villages.

How do you think Doris felt being taken away from her home and family?

Doris said she went to "Ely High School". This school no longer exists but was an all girls school on St Marys Street Ely.



*Bedford House Ely was the home of Ely High School for Girls from 1905-1972*



Doris talks about going skating in winter. Although not very popular now "fen skating" was an extremely popular local sport, with people travelling from London to watch skating races.

Doris remembers cycling to Cambridge, that's an over 30 mile round trip. Not many people owned cars during WW2 with many long journeys still being made by bicycle.

Doris remembers knitting gloves for soldiers instead of watching television. Knitting for soldiers was very popular during the war. It was encouraged by the government and millions of items were sent out to the soldiers on the front line.

Doris mentioned remembering a corn exchange. This building no longer exists but it was a huge building next to Ely marketplace. It was knocked down in the late 1960's.



*The Corn Exchange Ely*

Doris talks about food rationing. From the 8th January 1940 the British government limited the amount of food a person could buy. Meat, milk, cheese and eggs were all rationed. For example an adult was only allowed 1 egg a week!

Doris visited an orchard and picked apples. There are not many orchards in Ely now but during the war, Ely was surrounded by orchards especially at Soham.



*Reg Newman practising on his unicycle in his orchard on Fordham Rd, Soham*