

A Waltham Forest woman has told her story of what life was like in Highams Park during the Second World War after her mum brought her back from the countryside

By Zoie O'Brien

Standing on the platform at Highams Park Station, Janet Gibbs and her mother dreaded going to the countryside with all the other evacuees.

Janet Gibbs was supposed to have an ordinary childhood. Living on the edge of Epping Forest her family would enjoy picnics and the slow paced life on the traffic free streets.

However, in 1939, just after she had turned four, Britain went to war. Highams Park was a quiet "suburban area" with tree-lined streets where life was very simple, according to Janet.

"Life was lazy, content and peaceful. The women would chat on the corners of the street probably discussing what to have for dinner or how their children were progressing at school," she said.

"Hardly any cars in those days, buses and trains were the most used transport."

After the outbreak of war Janet's house in Selwyn Avenue was transformed into a 'war proof' area with blacked out windows. Morrison table shelters were handed out for free unless a family earned too much money. However, Janet's father was a city worker who was unfit for war.

The family had to wait for weeks for their shelter and took to the cupboard under the stairs with blankets, two torches and three stools.



Young Janet lived in Highams Park with her mother and father during the

“On one occasion the siren had barely finished its last warning note when the bombing started. I was just climbing onto the bed, suddenly there was a terrific bang and I was hurled across the room and landed in a heap against the wall.”

Soon, the bombing was too much for Mrs Gibbs, who made the tough decision to take Janet away from Highams Park.

Describing her journey from Highams Park Station, Janet remembered it as a fun time. “The atmosphere was electric, anyone would have thought we were going on holiday,” she said.

“Dad kissed us both goodbye and mum was very tearful, but put on a brave face.

“Piling onto the train with our mums we kids must have looked a heart-rendering sight – name tags on our coats, gas marks hanging from a string from our necks and cases firmly gripped with grubby little fingers.”

However, two weeks in the countryside was too much for Mrs Gibbs.

She could not get to grips with “communal life” and her and Janet returned to London – and the Blitz.

However, her home had changed and the streets of Waltham Forest were dark and quiet.

“The road signs, railway station names, any form of identification of places had been removed. Identity cards were carried in case any Germans managed to ‘drop in’” she remembered.

“Blocks of cement were placed at different points in the road to act as defence against enemy tanks.

“Our local sweet shop began to make ice cubes – a cube of ice with a drop of lemon which we sucked until the lemon disappeared. We called them ice creams because we thought they were.”

Janet Gibbs moved to Southend on Sea in Essex where she met Matt Mackinnon-Pattinson who she married in 1978.

1. How did Janet Gibbs originally feel about being evacuated to the countryside?
2. Name three ways in which Janet describes the streets of Highams Park?
3. What was the most used transport in Highams Park in 1939?
4. How did Janet's family protect themselves during air raids before their Morrison Shelter arrived?
5. What did Janet see the other evacuees carrying?
6. How long did Janet and her mum last in the countryside?
7. What changes were made in Highams Park during the war?