

My memories of Whittingehame

By Laura Samuel (nee Leonore [Lorchen] Buchsbaum)

This memoir was received/recorded Jack Tully-Jackson in connection with his research into Jewish refugee children housed at Whittingehame. It was included in his exhibition, 'Balfour's Bairns', displayed at St Mary's in May 2008.

My father had been deported back to Poland in 1938 and my mother joined him once she had ensured that my brother and I were both safe. I always thought I would see them again. I was happy to leave Berlin and this new adventure was like going on holiday. They in fact died in the Holocaust.

I arrived at Whittingehame in May 1939 from Berlin and my brother in September of the same year. Altogether there were about 160 of us, a mixture of Austrians, Czechoslovakians, Poles and Germans. We all spoke German. My first impression of the house was how big it was but also how bare. There was nothing on the walls. As you entered the house, straight in front of you was the staircase. To the left were two dining rooms and a piano room and to the right was a ballroom, a reading room and the library. The ballroom had been made into a synagogue for the Orthodox children to say prayers in the morning and the evening. The dining rooms were set out with big tables, about eight at a table, but there was nothing else in there at all and the walls were bare. The reading room was quite different. It had French doors that opened onto a patio and it was the only room with heating, which was a wood-burning fire. The room was used for quiet sitting, reading, and sewing.

On the first floor were the boys' bedrooms. The boys were lucky as these would have formerly been for guests, so they were quite big. One of their bedrooms had been fitted out for a visit by Queen Victoria and it was the only room with a basin and a WC in it. The second floor would have been the servants' rooms and they were smaller. You could not reach them from the main staircase so you had to go up a smaller one further along the hallway. There were about eight girls' bedrooms on this floor, with additional bedrooms in several annexes. I shared a bedroom with seven other girls. We each had an iron bed, two sheets, a pillow and two blankets, which were not always enough to keep out the cold. We looked out to the back of the house and I remember on one occasion being dared to step out of the window onto a narrow ledge and sidle along it to the next room. I lived to tell the tale but looking at a photograph of the house all these years later, I must have been mad. At the end of our hallway were two bathrooms with a bath and toilet in them but no hand basin so we brushed our teeth over the bath.

In the basement was a sewing room, a workroom, a photographic 'studio' and the kitchen. The kitchen had a dumb waiter in it to send food up to the dining rooms. I can confess now that we sometimes climbed on to it and used to ride up and down but we were never caught.

Mr Maxwell, our headmaster, was an Englishman. He did not interfere with us and we ran the school like a kibbutz. We set up a committee who made all the decisions and wrote the weekly work schedule with Mr Maxwell's approval. We worked for half of the day and attended school for the other half. Some worked in the fields and some on the estate without pay but in lieu of our board and lodgings. The rest of us would do all the cooking, cleaning and washing. The staff were in charge of our schooling, such as it was. There was a Palestinian Jewish teacher who taught us Hebrew, of which I learnt very little, two other teachers from Germany, and Mr Drew, who was from England. Our Matron was called Miss La Coeur. (This may not be the correct spelling but it was how it was pronounced.) She was from Berlin. Her sister had run the kindergarten that I had gone to and she knew my mother, who had done sewing repairs for the kindergarten. The cook supervised us while we did the cooking and we were taught either carpentry or sewing. I had a heart condition which meant that I spent a lot of time in the sewing room. I was taught how to patch clothes, how to use the treadle sewing machine, and how to iron. In the sewing room there was also a basket for socks that needed to be darned. When it was full, we would take this basket to the reading room and all the girls would sit around sewing. On occasions someone might read aloud or sing Scottish folk songs until the darning was done. We respected each other and there was no misbehaviour by anyone.

There was little in the way of entertainment. The English teacher, Mr Drew, sometimes got a big projector and showed us silent films. I loved them, We had one big outing where we were taken on coaches to a cinema in Dunbar, I think, to see "The Great Dictator", starring Charlie Chaplin. Sometimes we built a stage in the library and put on a show for Lord Balfour and Lady Traprain. I usually sang the part of Nelson Eddie and another girl sang the part of Jeanette McDonald. I don't remember there having been any table tennis and the swimming pool was used later by the Scottish evacuees who attended the school after I had left.

Lady Traprain was a traditional Scottish lady, very kind and polite. Once a month she would invite the 'birthday children' to afternoon tea. We would put on our best clothes, if we had them, and take the five minute walk to the old gatekeeper's house where she lived. It was a very traditional sitting room where Lady Traprain would serve us tea in bone china cups with saucers. We were

offered cucumber sandwiches without crusts and there were little cakes on a trivet. When it was my turn, there were five girls and boys who went with me and we sang traditional Scottish folk songs that we had been taught. I still love them today.

When war broke out, the boys who came from Germany were taken to an internment camp at Lingfield race course. Lord Balfour got them back for us. The only things that were bad about our stay at Whittinghame were that we were not paid when we worked in the fields or on the estate and that we had to leave at sixteen to go out in the world on our own, without a good education and with poor English. However, we were safe, had a bed to sleep in and food to eat.

We only had a two year permit to stay in Britain. When we were sixteen, we all had to leave Whittinghame. Some went to stay with families, some went to hostels and some, like me, went to a kibbutz near Tewksbury. After a year I returned to Scotland as a domestic in a house near Glasgow.

There was a meeting in Israel a few years ago, but I did not manage to go. It turned out that some of did well, some not so well, but no one turned into a criminal. Now we are all starting to disappear. I am still in touch with four people from Whittinghame. Although we are all in our later years, we still talk of our time together. My memories of Whittinghame are good ones but some found it more difficult, missing their families and home life.

I wonder what our future would have been like if it were not for Hitler? I visited Berlin a few years ago. I did not feel at home and I never want to go there again. I have settled in England but sadly this does not feel like home either. I am grateful to have been brought to Britain and thank all who made it possible. The two years I spent at Whittinghame were the happiest of my early life. I am only sorry it did not last longer.

A postscript from her daughter, Pauline Dennis.

I thought I would let you know the end story. My mum became a dressmaker. One of her customers introduced her brother, my dad Philip, to my mum. They married in Scotland before moving to London. They had three children, Robin, myself (Pauline), and Diane, and lived in the London area for about twenty-five years before they moved to Bath in 1983. My dad died nearly twenty years ago but my mum still lives in Bath. She has just celebrated her eighty-third birthday. The three of us, her eight grandchildren and her brother, who lives in Israel, are her only living relatives.



Laura Samuel revisiting Whittingehame.





Images from the 2008 exhibition, 'Balfour's Bairns'. The children are not named.