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DMJ in Croydon 1939-1945

The European situation became more and more grave and war was inevitable. During the summer holidays preparations for the evacuation of London children went on. Each district's turn was announced by the BBC. On Saturday evening 3rd September, it was announced that the departure of Croydon children would take place on Monday 5th September. All day Sunday the pupils came to get their identity badge, information about the journey etc. This morning war between England and Germany was declared...a quarter of an hour later London had its first warning! On Monday morning about 300 pupils assembled in the hall, each carrying a small bundle of clothes and food. In the afternoon they set off accompanied by the Headmistress, Mother Winifride, four other nuns and a number of lay mistresses. At the station they boarded the train not yet knowing their destination! It was a sad departure, full of anxieties for those who were going away and for those who remained behind. On the next day, however, a postcard was received from Eastbourne which was rather assuring. War had been declared but nothing happened; everywhere people resumed their ordinary way of life. The pupils who had remained at home wished to continue their studies. The Government allowed the schools to be reopened for these children. On the 21st of November Mother Winifride came back to Coloma and received 40 pupils in the Hall – a very small number but the house was not without children. Mother M. Benignus returned from Eastbourne also and went to Sanderstead, where the Training College was installed. Mother Mary Adelaide and Mother Augustine were recalled from Eastbourne and gave lessons here, where the number of pupils continued to increase whilst that at Eastbourne diminished. Mother M. Lucie directed studies here.

The ceremony of profession took place at Coloma (for the first time) at Easter 1940 when Mother M. Victoire and Mother M. Dominic made their perpetual vows.

In May with the fall of France it became evident that the South Coast was too dangerous and the order to leave it was daily expected. That order was given on the 20th June and the next morning we left in a train full of children. Towards evening we arrived at Llandilo, a small village in the south of Wales. Here the children were lodged with Welsh families. The three nuns found accommodation with difficulty. The people of this country still keep their prejudices of two hundred years ago. The greatest privation for our sisters was Holy Mass. There was no Catholic Church; the nearest was eight miles away. On the Sunday after their arrival, Holy Mass was celebrated in an inn ... it was the second time since the 15th century that Llandilo had had that happiness ... so great but so poorly appreciated there. The nuns found lodgings at Ammanford near the Church, where they remained for a few months, but it became impossible to make the journey to school in the winter and they were obliged to their great sorrow to leave the place where the Blessed Sacrament was and to come and live in Llandilo, where there was Mass only on Sundays and sometimes once during the week.

On the 15th August, the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Croydon had its first air raid. On the 17th, however, the ceremonies of profession and clothing were held in our chapel.

In October we lived in continual danger. During that long winter, day and night, air raids went on. All night long bombers passed over the house. Days and nights were spent in the shelter where the pupils had their lessons. In November Rev. Mother and a few members of the Forest Hill Community came here to live with us. M. Winfrides house had been hit by a bomb – the school had been completely destroyed and three of our dear sisters buried in the ruins. What grief, what sorrow for our superiors!

Here a bomb burst near the house and nearly all the windows were broken by the force of the explosion but none of us was injured, Deo Gratias! Raids continued during the spring of 1941 and the convent suffered fresh damage but nothing serious. The Sacred Heart has indeed protected His house.

At Easter the little school of St. Winifride's had been reopened and Rev. Mother M. Columba and four nuns went back there to live. Summer was a little quieter and the evacuated nuns came back to make their annual retreat with the Community.

The Ministry of Labour had requisitioned the Kindergarten building which had been empty since the beginning of the war and the little pupils occupied three rooms in the Secondary School. During the following months, pupils continued to come here and the number had increased to two hundred. However, the evacuees were returning from Wales. The return of everyone was desired. The school year ended at Llandilo with sixty pupils, four nuns and three lay mistresses. In July our four sisters returned to their convent after three long years of absence. It was evident that our dear Rev. Mother Mathilde was failing; she had to spend a few months at Hatchlands. The trouble and worry experienced during that long bombardment had undermined her health. She felt she was no longer capable of governing so large a house. Her resignation was accepted and she was replaced by Rev. Mother Mary Colomba whilst Rev. Mother Mary Gertrude, newly elected, was named Superior at Forest Hill.

At the beginning of the school year in September 1942, there were more than four hundred pupils in the Secondary School and about a hundred in the Kindergarten. Air raid warnings were less frequent this winter and lessons were given as usual. Everything seemed calm and daily duties were gradually resumed. The Kindergarten was needed now ... there were no longer enough classrooms for the children in one house.

In July 1943 the Government officials gave us back our building which they had had for two years.

In September 1943, Mother Mary Benignus and the students of the Training College left St. Anne's, where they had been for two years and where they had received so much kindness and hospitality.

Towards the middle of September the College was working at Coloma again and it continues to prosper there.

In December 1943, Sister Sophie had fallen ill; her condition became worse and she received the Last Sacraments and was later taken to hospital where she died on 16th January at the age of 85 years. She was a very good sister, very devoted to the Institute. She was portress here for over twenty years and many people knew her. She was respected and loved by all. At this time, our dear Rev. Mother Constance was also ill and her condition was becoming more and more serious.

On the 17th of January she received the Last Sacraments but we kept on hoping. She died on 21st January, two months before her Golden Jubilee for which preparations were already being made. Her death was very edifying, calm and peaceful. What a loss for the Institute and especially for the English houses to which she had devoted herself for more than forty years, some thirty of which had been spent in the House of the Sacred Heart. She was a beloved mother whose loss is still mourned.

In May 1944 Mother Winifride celebrated her Silver Jubilee as Headmistress of Coloma. The pupils offered her a donation for a statue of the Blessed Virgin that she wanted for the new building. They read a beautiful address and a rich spiritual bouquet was presented to her. The young nuns of each house in England and America expressed their gratitude for all that she had done to help them in their studies. They offered her a spiritual bouquet and a beautiful address.

The 17th June marked the 75th birthday of the house. It was the day after the Feast of the Sacred Heart. Great preparations had been made and celebrations worthy of the occasion were expected. On the vigil of the 16th, there was a continual warning – it was the beginning of the flying – bombs. In the morning, however, High Mass was celebrated, the harmony of the music mingling with the noise of the explosions. This lasted all day; night was even worse, and towards morning on the 17th one of those infernal missiles fell a few yards away. All the windows of the three buildings were broken at one go. Many of the rooms had no more ceilings, doors were wrenched off and the house suffered considerable damage. In spite of everything it was decided not to change the arrangements already made. In the afternoon the Mayor of Croydon and some of the town councillors arrived. An old pupil read an address to which the Mayor replied, expressing the pleasure that he felt on this occasion. He spoke at length of the excellence of the school and the good education the pupils received in it – among them his own daughter. Later in the afternoon there was a “Garden Fete”; and many people were present; but warnings were becoming more and more frequent and towards evening the garden was deserted.

The flying bombs continued to come during the ensuing months. The number of children diminished, but lessons went on until the last day of the bombs, 20th September. In July, the Higher School and School Certificate Examinations took place in the gymnasium. There, near the shelter, about sixty pupils were installed. All went well, thanks be to God, and the results later were excellent. These air raids went on during the summer holidays; everything was in a state of uncertainty but it was decided

not to change the date fixed for the opening of the school year, 20th September. That day, nearly three hundred pupils were present. The term passed uneventfully and fairly quietly. In the spring there were fresh attacks by rockets. On 8th May victory in Europe was celebrated by two days holiday. It was the occasion of a fervent Te Deum of joy and thanks to God who had crowned with success the soldiers of Great Britain and her allies who had protected all of our houses during this long war.

This joy was followed by a very sad event, the death of our dear Sister Winifride. She died on the 18th June after an operation. For some time she had been suffering and that operation became inevitable. She had been Headmistress of Coloma for twenty-six years, and had always devoted herself wholeheartedly to her pupils and to the work of education. Her death was a great loss for the Institute and for this house, especially at that critical moment for Catholic schools in England.

The hundreds of letters received after her death bore witness to the great respect and admiration that Mother Winifride inspired in all who knew her.

The school year 1944-5 ended with a great increase in the number of pupil; there were 520 in the Secondary School and 165 in the Kindergarten.

On 15th August 1945 Mother Marie Winifride arrived in Coloma to take up the arduous and very difficult task of Headmistress. She had just succeeded in obtaining the continued recognition of our house in Scarborough as a Direct Grant School, and she was faced with the task of securing the acceptance of Coloma by the Local Education Authority as a Voluntary Aided School. This in itself was formidable, but by the end of her first year of office, Mother Marie Winifride had established most friendly relations with the local officials and a big development plan was proposed. This included the building and equipment of a new laboratory for Chemistry and Physics, a new Art Room - as the existing one was considered unsafe in case of fire – and a room for the use of the School Secretary. The curriculum too was changed in many respects to meet the approval of the Inspector.