

Memories of Rhydymwyn by Freda Richmond (née Williams)



To begin: where were you born and how did you come to Rhydymwyn?

I was born at Traeth Goch on Anglesey, to a Welsh speaking mother and father. I first came to Rhydymwyn when I was three years old, when my father was appointed Station Master and Goods Agent. So I found myself a monolingual Welsh child in a more or less monolingual English community – something which has given me empathy for immigrant children everywhere!

Tell me about your family.

My father, Owen John Williams (known as O.J.) was in charge of three stations – Rhydymwyn, Star Crossing and Nannerch. We lived in the station house at Rhydymwyn and my mother kept house. I was an only child – all the rest of our family were back in Anglesey and Caernarfon, and we made regular trips back to see them.

We had no electricity in the station house. And the village only got its first street light in 1937 or 38 – just before the War blacked it out again!

What are your memories from before the War?

I went to Rhydymwyn Primary School. My first teacher was Bertha Roberts, whom I adored. She spoke Welsh, so she helped me learn English. I didn't speak any when I first went to school! I can remember the infants class had some toys like coloured eggs we could take apart and screw together again – I think it was to help with our manual dexterity. The teacher read *Winnie the Pooh* to us, bit by bit. The vicar used to come in from time to time – we had regular exams in scripture

studies. We used to do maypole dancing on summer sports day. And in our last year, we all made bamboo pipes, a bit like a recorder. I still have mine!

We went to church on Sundays. Coed Du Hall (where Mendelssohn once stayed) was a women's mental hospital by then, and the women from there used to be brought down for communion.

Funerals were a big event for us children. We used to be taken to see the flowers on the grave and to read the messages. And we would sing a song about 'Happy the dead that the rain falls on.'

My husband was a Quaker, but the first Quaker I ever met was an Australian artist called Dorothy Stevens. She lived in a house called Kangaroo Corner on the Blue Mountains. She had carved a kangaroo which sat outside on a mound of stone covered with blue creeping flowers. She was the village peacemaker – she used to be called on when there were disputes. She went back to Australia eventually, when a friend died leaving a young family who needed looking after. She bequeathed the kangaroo to the Postmaster – I don't think he quite knew what to do with it! Years later, when we travelled to Australia, I tried to make contact, but she had died just months earlier.

I can remember the Jubilee of King George and Queen Mary. We had a day's holiday. There were sports in the village and afternoon tea. And I remember the feeling of resignation when King Edward abdicated. There was a creeping feeling that War was on its way. And then of course there was the coronation of George VI, which we listened to on the radio.

By then I was taking extra lessons to study for the Entrance Scholarship to the grammar school – the Alun School in Mold. I was the only girl in my year at Rhydymwyn whose family allowed her to take the exam. That was one of the last years when you still needed to pay to go to the grammar school, but I got a half scholarship. Once I passed, I would catch the train every morning to get to school.

The teachers at the Alun School used to talk about what was coming. A lot of the male teachers had been through the First World War. The chemistry teacher, Freddy Chem we called him, used to tell us, "this is the stuff that is going to be dropping on your heads."

What was the school uniform like?

A gymslip with six box pleats, three at the front, three at the back. White blouse and a tie. Black Wolsey woollen stockings with a seam up the back. Felt hat in summer. Straw in summer. Black Oxford shoes, and white lace-up plimsolls for gym. All bought at the Free Trade Hall in Mold. We weren't allowed to be seen eating in the street in our uniforms! They were very strict about that.

What did you wear for gym?

Just our gym slips. Until a new teacher came who wanted us to take them off and do gym in our navy blue knickers. We hated that! The boys used to try and peak through the door. We used to do warm up exercises like star jumps. We had a vaulting horse. And we played hockey in the winter and tennis or rounders in the summer.

The river used to flood before the War, didn't it?

Yes. It used to come pouring down between the platforms at the station. Passengers who wanted to cross from one side to another had to be carried! Then in 1933, a girl was swept into the river and

nearly drowned. Someone jumped into the river and saved her. I think it was the old Postmaster, Mr Hughes (*the grandfather of Iris whom you've interviewed on this site*). I believe he received a commendation for bravery.

But when the work on P6 began, they changed the course of the river so it wouldn't flood any more. It would have been far too dangerous, I imagine, given the materials they were dealing with.

There used to be snowstorms too. The valley used to be cut off for two or three weeks at a time and even the trains couldn't get through for a time. We wouldn't be able to get to school.

So what do you remember about the start of the War?

We all sat round the radio and heard the broadcast that announced it. Almost straight away, people started to worry about food. And the material arrived for blackout curtains. By 1940, almost all cars were off the road, but my father was still allowed one because he needed it for his work.

People were being called up, and would have to get from Rhydymwyn to wherever they were posted at a set time. Not always easy! I remember my father working out a complicated rail timetable to get a woman called Dorothy Sheldon from the Sun Inn all the way up to the Kyle of Lochalshe.

Did you have an air raid shelter?

Not at home. At school, if the sirens went off, we used to all go into the corridors, which were sandbagged. That was when I learnt to knit. At home, we just used to ignore them! We knew sounds of the different types of bombers, and I can remember seeing a few dogfights between Spitfires and Messerschmits, between us and Liverpool.

Amazing, really, given P6 was there, that we weren't bombed more. You could look down from the hillside towards Bryn Celyn and see it all lying there, its roofs shiny. So it must have been visible from the air. I remember a few incendiary bombs being dropped very close to us. They looked a bit like the frames of an old fashioned lantern once they were burnt out. But I don't know for sure if they were aiming at P6 or just dropping them en route to or from Liverpool. I don't remember them doing any real damage. Looking back, we were very lucky!

What did you do for entertainment?

The first film I ever saw was *Saunders of the River* (1935). We were taken from primary school to see it in Mold. It was years before I saw another film. There was radio – I remember Larry the Lamb and Children's Hour. And a Welsh language Children's Hour – I must have been the only child in the village that listened to that! When the accumulators in the radio ran down, we used to have to take them to Hendry's garage in Mold to get them charged up.

Once we were older, we used to catch the train into Mold on Saturdays. Students at the Alun School had a 'railway contract' (a type of season ticket) so we could use it at weekends. We would go to the market and then get chips and hot lemonade from Belli Brothers (an Italian family firm) – so good on a cold day!

There was a library in Mold, but you could only use that if you were a resident of the town. Our village 'library' was a set of locked boxes, kept in the village hall. Once every two weeks, a woman

called Mrs Thomas came and unlocked them, and you could borrow a book. I remember she used to smoke non-stop.

So women did smoke back then?

Oh, yes. I think that became common in the 1920s.

Did your parents smoke?

My mother didn't. My father smoked a pipe.

Tell us about domestic life. You said you didn't have any electricity.

We had a coal burning stove and an open coal fire. My father used to light the stove every morning. Most people used to use a flat iron that you heated up on the stove, but my mother preferred the old fashioned kind which had a brick inside. You'd heat the little brick on the coal fire, then take it out with tongs and put it into the iron through a little door. I used to iron my school uniform and my dad's uniform trousers. He was very particular about the crease on his trousers. If the material got too shiny, I'd damp the ironing cloth with vinegar.

Clothes were rationed during the War. I remember I was to be confirmed about a year after the War began and it was really difficult to get a white dress. Later we got very good at making new clothes out of old. We would unpick old knitted garments, wind them into hanks, wash them in hot water to get out the kinks, then knit them up again. My father's old shirts were cut into blouses and aprons. There was a dressmaker in Hendry called Kit Lloyd who, if I pleaded, would make an old coat into skirt. And once, just after the War but when clothing was still rationed, I made a summer dressing gown out of bleached flour bags, with a blue trim made of remnants.

My dad always had someone dig the vegetable garden in the spring and would plant potatoes and celery and leeks.

During the war there was a shortage of coal, but everyone needed it, for heating and cooking. Some of the railway staff used to use railway coal when they were desperate. My father turned a blind eye, but when a railway inspector was coming, sometimes desperate action needed to be taken to stop people getting into trouble.

Did you have shampoo?

Yes! Amami. I can remember the ad. "Friday night is Amami night." And Knights Castile soap.

Even during the War?

I don't remember ever going without it.

What do you remember about P6?

It was very close to us. There can't have been more than a yard between the back wall of our vegetable garden and the brick wall of P6. It seemed to spring up almost overnight, it all happened so quickly.

On hot days, there was a horrible, sickly-sweet smell that hung over the place. I used to see the scientists there come outside in their black rubber coveralls and sit on the roof.

The Duke of Kent came to visit P6, just months before he died in 1942. And the King and Queen came a bit later. My father had to greet them. He said the King was very quiet, but the Queen was friendly and very well briefed and asked a lot of intelligent questions.

What was your father's involvement with P6?

Because he was the Goods Agent as well as the Station Manager, he used to be called in to breakfast meetings with the Americans, when they were discussing how to move materials out from P6. That happened quite regularly. And he used to help supervise packaging up the material and getting it onto the trains.

Of course, he couldn't talk about what he was doing, but he used to tell us about the breakfasts. He was astonished by the amount of food the Americans had available, as well as what they ate. Bacon with maple syrup!

Once the work at P6 was shut down, the village became an R&R centre for American soldiers. There used to be dances and whist drives. And Sulkie Races outside the Antelope. I remember once I was collecting money for a wartime charity. I approached one of the Americans and he swore at me. "I've done enough for this bloody country!"

What happened to you after the War?

When I was 17, I went to Liverpool University. We students were supposed to serve as fire watchers, sitting on the roofs at night, but the war ended before I had to do my first stint.

My best friend from university and I volunteered for a charity called Colomendy (the Dovecot) that provided holidays for deprived children from Liverpool at a camp near Rhydymwyn. That was when I had my first alcoholic drink, at the Loggerheads Pub. In my mind, We Three at the Loggerheads is always in sunshine!

While I was at University, I met my husband. He was doing an MA and working as a tutor. Marrying him changed my life. We ended up first in Edinburgh, then Bristol and eventually settled in Canada, where I still live.

Sadly, my father died not long after the War, from a very aggressive cancer. I've always believed it was because of material he was exposed to at P6.



Interview with **Freda Richmond** (née Williams) conducted by her daughter, September 2018

