



A photographic history

1939-1945

# Introduction

This book is a visual journey through the early history of Sayers Croft. It covers life at Sayers Croft, from when it was first built in 1940, through the war years when evacuated children lived here, to the end of the war. This page gives the historical background to the site, after which the rest of the book provides photographs which capture day-to-day life through the eyes of those who lived here between 1940 and 1945.

## The Early Years

Sayers Croft was built under the “Camps Act (1939)”, which provided money for the building of fifty camps in England and Wales and five in Scotland—though in the end only thirty-three were actually built. The government had designed the camps to be used as outdoor schools during peacetime, but they were also preparing for war; the camps were meant to be used as evacuee and refugee centres to give people places to live out of cities and away from danger.

By August 1939, it seemed certain that Britain would go to war with Germany. The destruction caused in European towns and cities by Hitler’s air force, the *Luftwaffe*, meant the British government needed a way of moving huge numbers of civilians away from big cities like London. September 1<sup>st</sup> 1939 marked the first day of “Operation Pied Piper”, which was the code name for the government’s plan to evacuate more than 3.5 million people out of danger areas to safer places.

In the first three days of evacuation, 1.5 million people were moved, including 827,000 school-aged children and 103,000 teachers and other adult “helpers”. Several thousand evacuees were eventually moved to camp schools, including the 200 boys from Brownhill Road and Catford Central schools in London who, after first staying in Kent, arrived at Sayers Croft Camp at 4:00 p.m. on Wednesday 15<sup>th</sup> May 1940.

Many of the evacuated boys stayed at Sayers Croft for the duration of the war, with life being led as close to normal as possible. They had lessons, played sports, and received visits from parents, all in the relative safety of the English countryside. At the end of the war, Sayers Croft was used by Dutch children as a safe place to receive medical care and food, as their homeland had been devastated by the war and Nazi occupation.

Once the threat of war had gone Sayers Croft returned to its original peacetime purpose, providing a place for inner city children to experience and learn about the outdoors. To this day, Sayers Croft continues to welcome children and their teachers, and almost all of the modern-day site remains exactly as it would have been seen by the London schoolboys of 1940.



This is a typical evacuation scene, as children wait with their luggage, gas masks and labels around their necks. The Catford boys were first evacuated to Ashford in Kent.



Evacuees arrive in West Sussex.

Garland Photo

Ashford did not remain safe for long, however, as Sayers Croft schoolmaster Harry Gell remembers. *"In May 1940...when Hitler began his blitzkrieg into the Low Countries, Ashford did not seem to be a very wise place in which to keep the evacuees."*



These pictures show a group of visitors to Sayers Croft, dressed as evacuees arriving at "Camp" and having an air raid drill.



You can see the gas mask boxes and labels in the picture above, just like in the real evacuee photo on the opposite page.



With Ashford becoming too dangerous for children to stay, the boys were moved to their new school in the countryside:  
*“We were gathered up very quickly by Timson’s buses and deposited at Sayers Croft Camp in Ewhurst.”*



*“The buildings were all erected and the equipment ready for use, but there were no paths and we shared the camp with the workmen for the first six weeks.”* - Harry Gell, a teacher at Sayers Croft during the war, describes the boys’ arrival.



Due to the constant threat of bombing, one thing which had to be ready for the boys' arrival was the large underground air raid shelters.



There was one shelter to each dormitory, and several remain intact after recent repair work to preserve them.

Visitors to Sayers Croft can take a history tour to experience what it was like to go down into the shelters during an air raid.





Many of the children evacuated from cities had never been out to such small, quiet places before. For the Catford schoolboys, Ewhurst would have been very different to what they were used to, and a strange new experience.



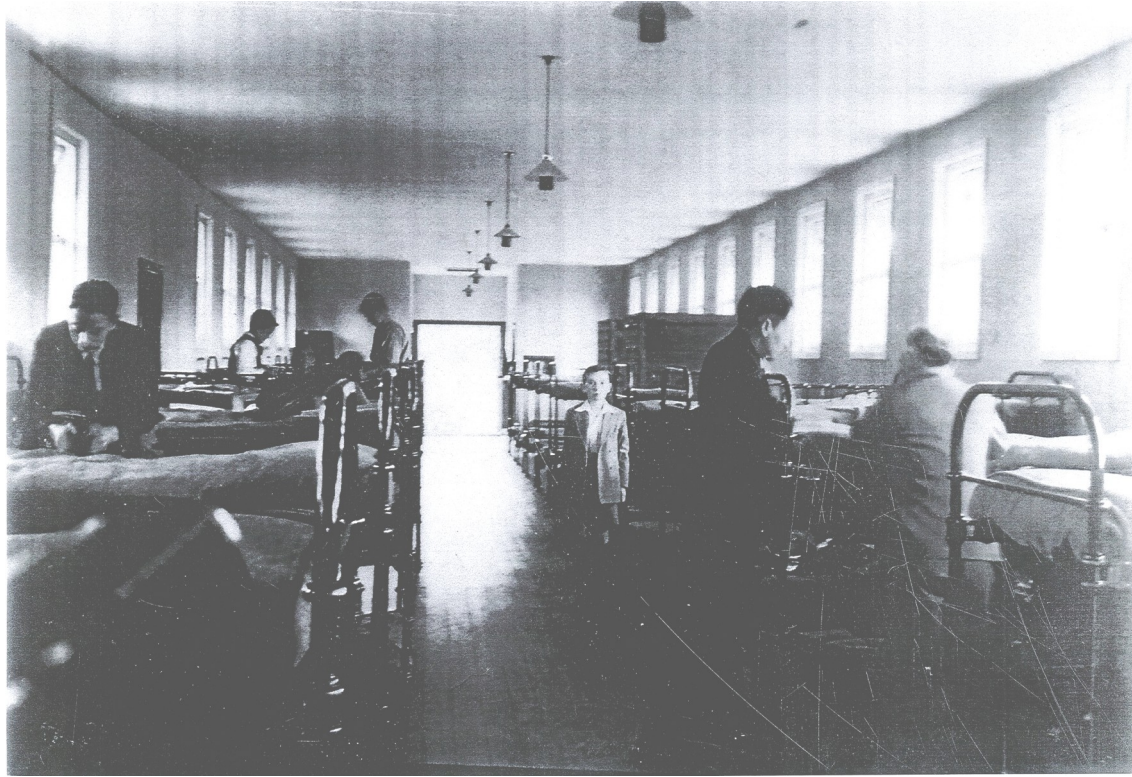
This is a picture of the north end of Ewhurst village, showing many houses which are still standing today.



As can be seen in this photo, however, a lot of things have changed; especially the number of cars on the road and what they look like, and the trees on Pitch Hill.







*“the very first night...was probably the first time that many of the boys had been away from home and after lights out a few sounds of weeping could be heard.” - Ron Rosewell, evacuee.*

*“Our beds had to be stripped and blankets and sheets folded neatly and positioned on the foot end of the beds. Then it was time to stand by your beds for inspection.”*





The modern dormitories are more comfortable than in the 1940s, with their indoor toilets and better heating, though visitors can still experience part of Sayers Croft's history, sleeping in bunk beds very similar to those the Catford boys used.



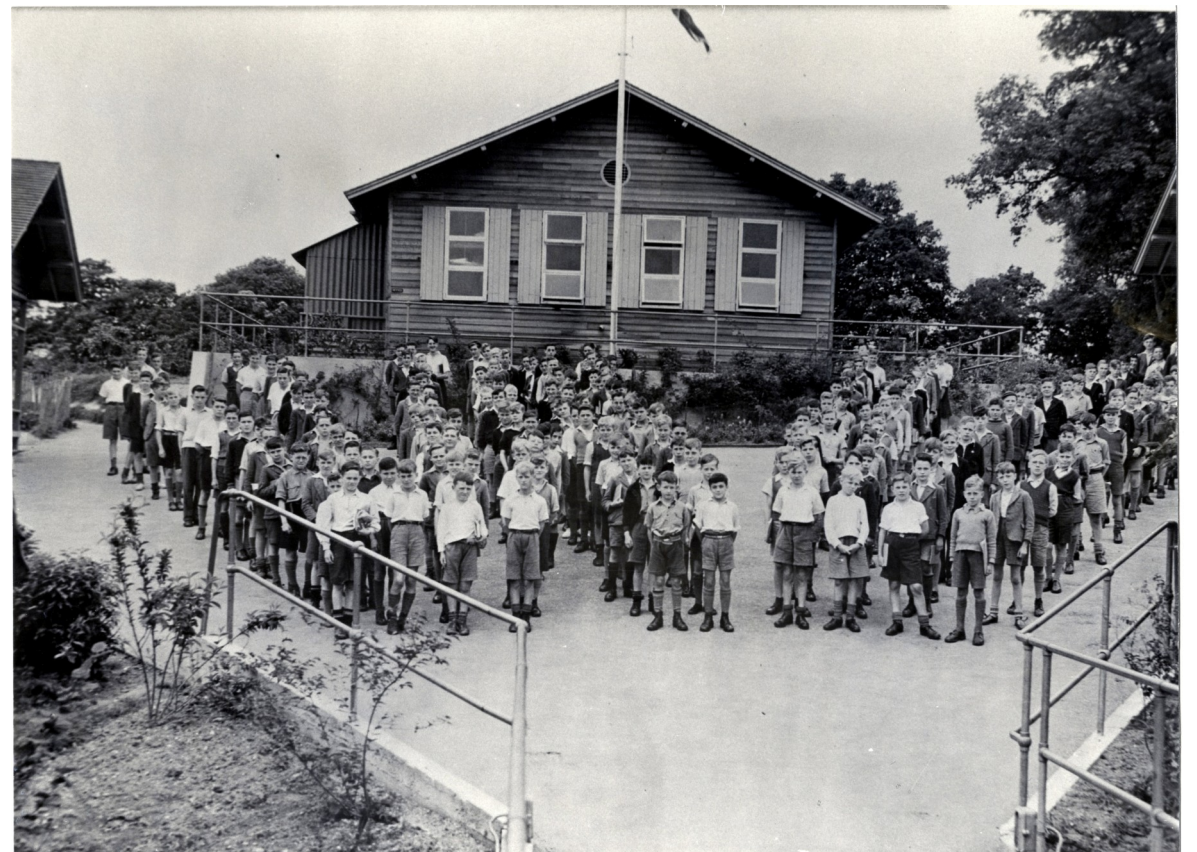




Ron Wallbridge remembers the start of a normal school day:

*“After the inspection we were lined up outside and marched down to the parade ground in front of the main hall, where all the houses were assembled.”*

The boys were split into dormitories, each one named after a famous castle. Schools in the 1940s were very strict—masters would often hit boys with a slipper or sometimes a cane to punish bad behaviour.





This picture of the old “parade ground”, taken around 75 years after the photos opposite, shows how little has changed in the years between. The area is still a useful assembly point for visitors to Sayers Croft to prepare for the day’s activities.





Ron Wallbridge remembers that "The school was run similarly to the army in as much that there would be a teacher who would be orderly officer for the day together with a duty prefect." We can see this in these Daily Orders from 1940.

CATFORD CENTRAL SCHOOL  
EWHURST, SURREY

DAILY ORDERS

No. 2

TUESDAY, MAY 21st, 1940.

1. MASTERS. Orderly Officer.. .. Mr. Fraser  
Duty .. .. . Mr. Chambers (Rounders on Field 2)  
Mr. McGuinness do.  
Mr. Carrington (Stool-ball on Field 1)  
Mr. Gingell (Routine Office & Leisure)
2. PREFECTS  
Orderly Prefects . S. Burge, R.L. King  
Fire Squad . . . D. Howard, A. Hone, R. Last, A.J. Bugge  
Detention Prefect ... D. Howard
3. Prefects with Mr. Chambers & Mr. McGuinness, A. HONE  
with Mr. Carrington A. BUGGE
4. PICKET Arundel . . . E. Morris, J. Wright, H. Kinman  
Carnarvon . . N. Fowler, A. Coomes, S. N. Burge  
Dover . . . B. Cannon, P. Fewtrell, H. Eagles  
Stirling . . A. Parker, R. Steadman, P. Saunders.  
Windsor . . . D. McConnell, D. Boardman, P. Hart
5. Ration Cards All remaining cards of masters and boys must be handed to the Routine Master to-day.
6. Identity Cards All Identity Cards of boys must be handed to the Housemasters to-day, before noon.

Boys were expected to do extra jobs on certain days, when they were chosen to be "pickets", and had to run messages around the camp. The prefects had to do even more; collecting mail, filling fire buckets and checking toilets as well as other jobs.



We still run to strict timetables today, with many school groups participating in many different activities at once.

30	1	2	3	4
Meal Times: 08:00 12:20 18:15 Arrive: late tea please	Cobblers (SC)	Plant games (SC) Team play (SC) (PICNIC)	Cobblers Brook (SC)	Nature explorers Plant Games (SC) Invoice: WC 13.00
Pond dip Swim 8:15-9:45 3:45-4:15	1:30 ropes (SC) climb (SC) 01+2 3:00 01+2 ropes (SC) climb (SC) 4:30 climbs (SC) 01+2 ropes (SC)	Ponds (SC) 3:30 01+02 4:45-5:45 SWIM	WW1 trail (SC) 3:30 Streamwalk (SC) 4:30 Maze + bft	
Campfire Lab n.b.s	Batwalk (led) n.b.s	G.games (outdoor) + Campfire	Nightwalk (T.S)	
Meal Times: 08:05 12:25 18:10 Arrive: late tea please	Plant games (SC) team play (SC)	Cobblers (SC) (PICNIC)	Ponds (SC) Shelters (SC)	Woods Compass (SC) Team play (SC) Invoice: SP 13.10
1:30 ropes (SC) (climb) (SC) 01+2 3:00 01+2 ropes (SC) climb (SC) 4:30 climbs (SC) 01+2 ropes (SC)	Pond dipping Swim 8:15-9:45 3:45-4:15	Roundhouse (SC) Swim 15:15 & 15:45	Cave (SC) Clay Campfire	
Campfire n.b.s	Batwalk (led) n.b.s	Nightwalk (T.S)	Campfire	
Meal Times: 07:55 12:40 17:55 Arrive: only 12:45	Ponds (SC) Plants Games (SC)	Ropes (SC) climb (SC)	Ropes (SC) climb (SC)	Shelters Woods compass Invoice: 12.25
woods compass Shelter building 01+02 + swim	Rafts (SC) Challenge C 4:30 Maze + BFT + swim	Rafts (SC) M2 + BFT 01+02 Eve walk	swim Ballista (SC) Ponds (SC) Ponds (SC) swim Ballista (SC) Ballista (SC) Ponds (SC) swim	
Campfire + BBQ			Disco + (T.S)	
Meal Times: 07:50 12:35 18:00 Arrive:	Coveys (SC) 01+02 Rafts (SC) Woods Compass	Archery (SC) Ballista Clay clay Archery (SC) Ballista Ballista clay (PICNIC) Archery (SC)	shelters Woods C	Rafts (SC) Maze + BFT Invoice: KG 13.20
Rafts (SC) Coveys (SC) 01+02 01+02 Rafts (SC) Coveys (SC)	shelters Team challenges	Ropes (SC) Climb (SC) 01+02 Eve walk	See here	
Nightwalk (SC)	Campfire (T.S)		Disco + (T.S)	
Meal Times: 08:10 12:45 17:50 Arrive:	Archery (SC) Shelters	Pitch Hill (SC) (PICNIC)	Rafts (SC) Maze/BFT Ropes (SC) Climb (SC) swim - 4:45 - 5:45 Campfire Ballista (T.S)	Drums Depart 12pm (PICNIC) Invoice: 11am
01+02 Woods compass / 03 Ballista Eve walk (led)	Ponds (SC) Swim Earthwalk (SC) Parachute Bats/Ballista (T.S)	Disco		
Meal Times: 08:15 12:30 18:05 Arrive:	challenge C (SC) climb (SC)	rafts (SC) maze + BL	Pitch (SC) (PICNIC) Hill (SC) swim 4 - 4:45 Disco (T.S)	ponds shelters Invoice: 12:15
01, 02 SWIM 4:45-5:45 Rafts/Batwalk (led)	coveys ropes (SC) woods c campfire (T.S)	Hazel f 4 fig puzzlers		
Meal Times: Arrive: see Rudgwick				Invoice: 7/4 x SS Lab 2 AM: Mammal traps + Tree ID PM: Woods Compass/Animal tracks
		Ropes 5.30-1pm		
		5'6x1/2 Loxwood AM: Shelters + Aq SC PM: Shelters + Aq SC (hill) 2.30pm	Eve: Archery 5.15pm-6.45pm	5-6.30pm M+BFT

In some ways, it seems Sayers Croft was more technologically advanced in 1940, as today's programmes are hand-written!



Here we can see the boys in the dining hall; the summer mural at the end of the room was painted by some of the boys in this picture during their time at Sayers Croft.



David Reekie remembers the food at "Camp", saying that *"the tapioca pudding looked like and had the consistency of frogs' spawn. Another recognised horror of the Dining Hall was pea soup"*.



This image shows the other end of the dining hall containing the winter mural. *“The porridge on some mornings would be best eaten with a knife and fork, and egg powder was served up in a hundred different ways.”*



Both murals are now framed and protected behind glass screens. Although the building has been kept as similar as possible to the original design, the food today is thankfully much better!



*"Food, especially sweets, were in short supply...we supplemented our food by working on allotments."*



Here we see a horse ploughing the land next to what is now Holmbury dormitory, ready for the boys to turn it into allotments and grow their own vegetables.



This picture shows the same place in 2014, with the original buildings carefully preserved to be just as they were in the 1940s.



The area to the right is now home to our example Anderson shelter and Dig for Victory garden—an ideal use for the previous site of the boys' own gardens.



In their free time outside of lessons, the boys grew many different vegetables to add to their food rations, including cabbages, carrots, potatoes, radishes and tomatoes.



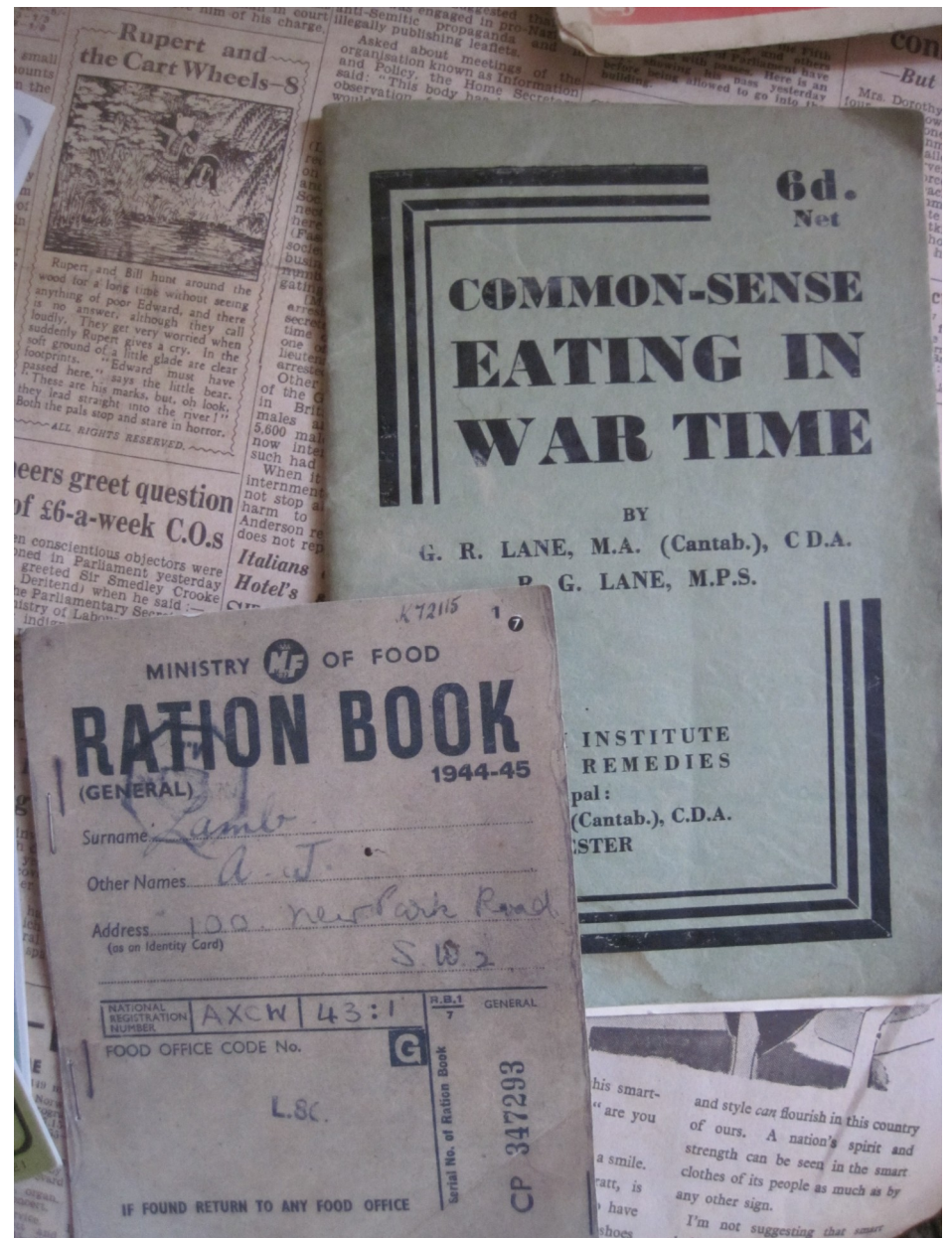
*“Cabbages and carrots were the easiest to grow but they didn’t taste all that good when served up in the canteen.” - Ron Rosewell*

The boys’ allotments were kept for the whole war—it was very important to grow as much food as possible.





Fresh fruit and vegetables were just some of the things that became very difficult to buy during the war. The sinking of ships by submarines meant that far less food reached the UK, so it had to be “rationed” to make sure everyone got a fair share.



These are real examples of wartime rationing posters and booklets which you can still see in our history room.



Here the boys are working in the allotments in summer: *“It was with great pleasure on our part — and certainly Mum and Dad were always very appreciative — when we were able to provide fresh vegetables for them on their monthly visits”.*





Although rationing continued long after the war was over, the need for extra food production slowly decreased.



This meant that areas like these could eventually be allowed to return to their natural state, as shown in the picture above.



As well as growing food, the boys had to learn useful repair skills, such as woodwork. When the supply of wood ran out, they began mending shoes, which was useful during wartime when materials to make new things were very difficult to get.



Geoff Blythe (on the left in this picture) remembers making his own thread out of hemp and beeswax to mend his shoes!

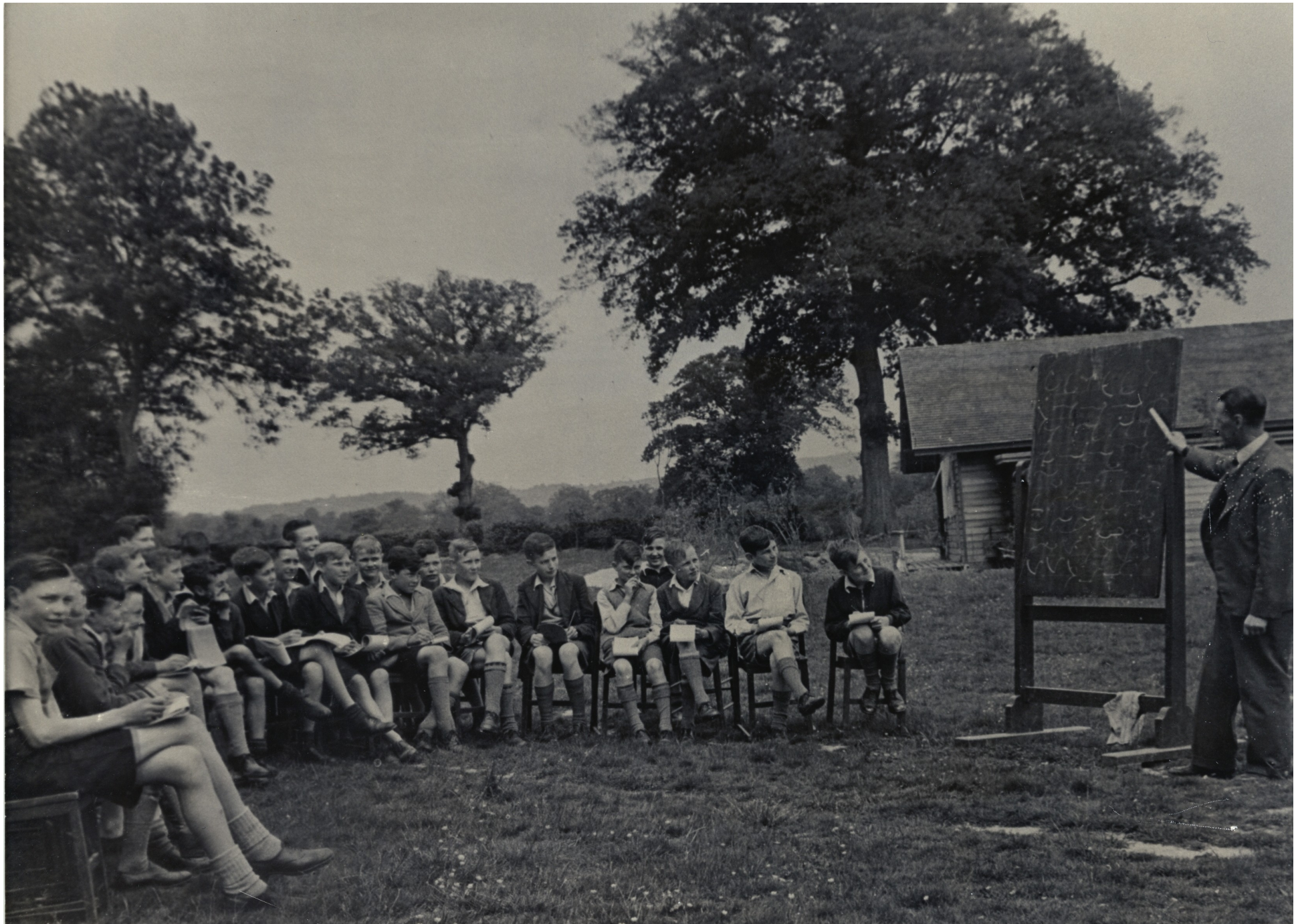


The “Old Woodwork Room” is now used by visiting groups as a classroom for scientific field studies activities, and we now have modern equipment like computers and projectors where the Catford boys used chisels and hammers.





The boys would have outdoor lessons when possible, even for subjects like Maths and English. In this picture—taken in one of Sayers Croft’s fields—they are learning “shorthand” - a quick writing system which uses symbols instead of words.





This picture shows the field today, with the same oak tree in the background. To the right you can just see the railings which mark the end of the hall shown in the 1940s picture.



The new building in the background is Dunsfold, our archery hall—which was brought to Sayers Croft after serving as a wash-block at a different camp school.



Most of the camp schools were built in very rural locations. The boys took full advantage of this, and sports and exercise were an important part of their lives at Sayers Croft.



As well as football, the boys would practice cricket and *stoolball*—an ancient English game which came before baseball and cricket. It was played using a small, hard ball, high wickets, and long-handled wooden bats a bit like table tennis paddles.



This picture shows the main drive and dining hall in 2014, preserved almost exactly as it was built nearly 75 years earlier.



Even the weeping beech tree—which was only a sapling in the picture on the opposite page—remains preserved in its place.



The sports which were encouraged in 1940s schools were very different to those played today. Here we can see that as well as table tennis and football tournaments, the boys who stayed at Sayers Croft during the war practiced boxing.

STIRLING HOUSE. ENTRIES FOR TOURNAMENTS.			
Football.		Table Tennis.	Chess.
Senior. Over 13 on 12/12	Junior. 13 or under.	12 entries.	8 entries.
Priest D.	Holmes L.	Priest F.	Barnichael F.
Rose L.	Everett K.	Butler S.	Hawkins D.
Reeves F.	Middleton C.	Gillham P.	Haines J.
Hawkins D.	Holmes F.C.	Rose L.	Butler G.
Stedman R.	Mitchell J.	Hawkins D.	Gillham P.
Haines J.	Middleton N.	Hughes R.	Holmes L.
Bater P.	Early D.	Bater P.	Middleton C.
Jarvis J.	Johnson S.	Barnichael B.	Hayward F.
Yates N.	Parker R.	Horne A.	
Hughes R.	Veale F.	Lowe L.	Res. Miller J.
Butler G.	Comfort K.	Hayward F.	
Res. Robertson Lowe	Res. Madsen M.	Yates N.	
Res.	Res.		
	<u>Boxing Senior.</u>		<u>Boxing Junior.</u>
9st-7. - 10st.	<sup>10-0<math>\frac{1}{4}</math></sup> Butler G. + wt.	6st-7---7st.	Jarvis J. (6.8) 6-1 $\frac{1}{2}$
9st- 9st-7.	7 9-5 $\frac{1}{2}$	6st----6st-7.	Stedman, R. (6.7) 6-8 $\frac{1}{2}$
8st-7--9st.	Lowe L. (8.12 $\frac{1}{2}$ )	5st-7---6st.	Holmes F.C. (5.9) 5-9 $\frac{1}{2}$
8st---8st-7.	Rose L. 8-7 $\frac{1}{2}$	5st---5st-7 4st-7===5st.	Mitchell J.
7st-7--8st.	Barnichael B. 7-4 $\frac{1}{2}$	4st-7---5st.	Veale D.
7st --- 7st.7.	Bater P. (7st.) 6-12 $\frac{1}{2}$		
Please return by Tuesday, 17 December.			
H.R. Baker			

One student, David Reekie, remembers being so badly beaten in a boxing match that he had to have liquid food for a week!



Activities encouraged in schools now are different to those of the 1940s, focusing more on communication and co-operation.



The pictures above show some of the many outdoor activities enjoyed at Sayers Croft today. The original idea of the camp schools—to give young people opportunities to enjoy the outdoors—is preserved by taking part in such activities.

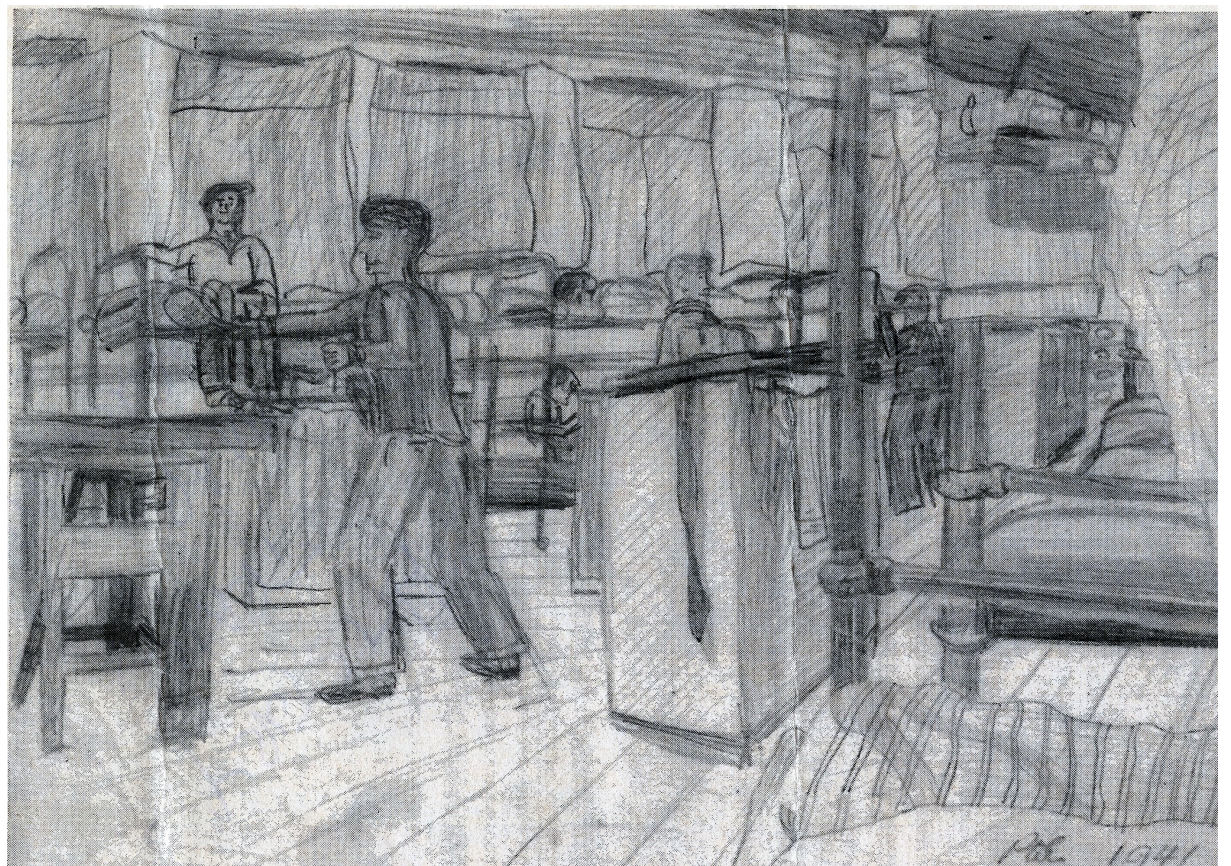


Another difference to schools today was that during wartime there were no school holidays. Cities were bombed so often that children spent all their time at camp in the countryside; they couldn't even go home if they were ill.



Instead, there was a “hospital” at Sayers Croft, run by two nurses who would care for the boys when they were sick. They even treated one boy’s pet rabbit!

This sketch from 1941 shows boys playing in their dormitory at night. The “blackout” meant that no light should be seen from the outside, so the boys hung blankets in the windows like curtains.





The old medical centre building is now staff accommodation, but is largely unchanged on the outside, as can be seen here.



Other present-day staff blocks have been converted from previous masters' accommodation, and the staff who lived on site had their own air raid shelter, which was a smaller version of the ones behind Bramley dormitory.



Cities were so dangerous during wartime that the boys' parents had to travel out to Sayers Croft once a month to visit them.



There were so many visitors that several bright red London buses were hired to bring parents to and from "Camp". Here we see the O'Brien and Wright families outside the tuck shop during a visit day.



This image shows the tuck shop in 2014, still selling after-dinner treats in the same place as it was in 1940.







The boys' families enjoyed getting out into the countryside just as much as they did — here we can see a family enjoying a walk through the woods with one of the boys.

This picture shows Geoff Blythe and his mother on a visit day, standing outside the Great Hall (now called Loxwood). Children dressed smartly for their parents' visits, which were very special occasions.





Parents and children still come to enjoy Sayers Croft together today, to take part in a range of activities and days out.



Thanks to the Sayers Croft Trust, the land north of the centre is now a dedicated nature reserve, so families today can enjoy the woods just like people did in the 1940s.



In the picture below, we can see parents visiting at Christmas time. The boys couldn't even go home during festive periods, as London was bombed day and night during the worst of the Blitz, so their parents had to come to Sayers Croft instead.



Parents' visits were a welcome break from the routine of life at "Camp", but they were too short and too rare for most boys. There were often tears at the end of the day when the parents had to return to London.



Visitors nowadays don't have to spend Christmas at Sayers Croft, but there are still opportunities for those who want to take part in some festive fun, including seeing Father Christmas in our roundhouse grotto.







Other events to look forward to were the theatre productions. The boys would regularly put on plays, shows and pantomimes in the Great Hall during the winter. This kept them busy, and was entertaining for everyone at camp.

The School and Camp Staffs and their Friends  
AT  
SAYERS CROFT CAMP, EWHURST, SURREY  
PRESENT  
“THE QUEEN OF HEARTS”  
A PANTOMIME  
in the Great Hall on Saturday, Dec. 28th, 1940  
AT 2.15 P.M.

— — — — —

“THE QUEEN OF HEARTS.”

Words by K. O. Samuel.  
Topical Lyrics by Raymond Scannell.  
Music—Adapted Selections from well-known Comic Operas.

Prologue...	...	...	The Witch's Cave.
Act I	...	...	Interior of the King's Castle.
Act II	...	...	The Market Place.
Act III—Scene I	...	...	Outside the Prison.
Scene II	...	...	Same as Act I.

The cast is grateful to Messrs. David Mann & Sons, Ltd., of Cranleigh,  
for the loan of various Stage Properties.

Pianist	...	...	Cecilia Gammon.
Stage Manager	...	...	Stanley Batts.

The Entire Production under the Direction of Leonard Gingell.



Above are David Reekie, Geoff Blythe and Cliff Colenutt; the cast of “Garrison Theatre”.

To the left is a programme for “The Queen of Hearts” - a pantomime created by the boys.



The “Great Hall” is now called Loxwood, which remains largely the same as in the 1940s, including the original wood flooring.



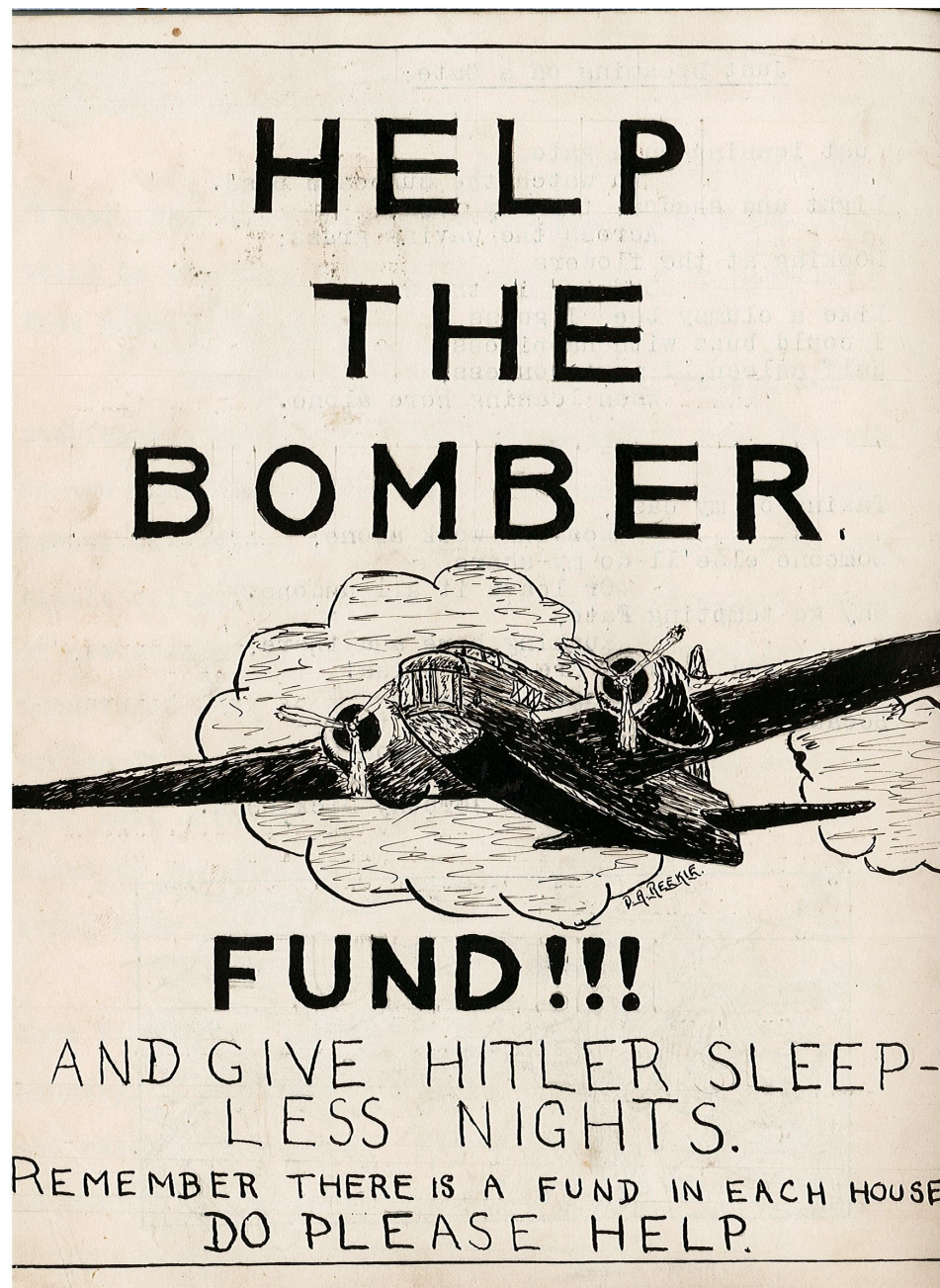
One significant difference, however, is that the stage area of the room has been converted to become the Craft Room, where today’s visitors can make clay models, hazel frames, corn dollies and other craft items from natural materials.







These pictures show more pages from a Stamp Club magazine, including a page encouraging boys to donate to the “bomber fund”. At the height of the war, every scrap of food, material and money that could be saved was crucially important.



Efforts like this were all part of keeping up the morale and effectiveness of those on the “Home Front” - the people who were not directly involved in fighting, but who were very important in keeping the country running to continue the war effort.



Here we can see “the crazy gang” from *Ship Ahoy*, one of the boys’ theatre productions. On the top row are Ron Sothcott and Len Rose; below, from the left, are Geoff Blythe, Douglas Priest and Malcolm Bonter.



The boys at Sayers Croft were lucky in many ways; for example being evacuated together with their schools—many other evacuees were separated from their friends. Many of them were, however, separated from their siblings, and some tragically lost family members to bombing raids.



The values of having fun, enjoying the outdoors and working together are as popular at Sayers Croft now as they were in the original camp schools.



Here, Sayers Croft staff replicate the “crazy gang” pose on the field where the original photograph was taken in 1941.



As well as their friends from school, some of the boys made new friends in the village and with the masters evacuated with them. This picture from 1990 is of Harry Gell, a young teacher at Sayers Croft at the start of the war, and Geoff Blythe, a pupil.



Harry remembers one of their first meetings during their early evacuation to Ashford, which was *“the beginning of a friendship which lasted all these years and passed from a schoolmaster/schoolboy relationship to one of mature adults.”*



In the years since they lived and studied together at Sayers Croft, many of the Catford boys have returned to visit “the old school”, sharing memories of what was for many of them—despite the war and its consequences—a happy time.



The picture above shows some of the ex-residents of Sayers Croft at their 60-year reunion.



Several times during their return visits to Sayers Croft, past pupils of the Catford schools have been surprised and pleased by how little has changed at “the old school” since their time here in the 1940s.





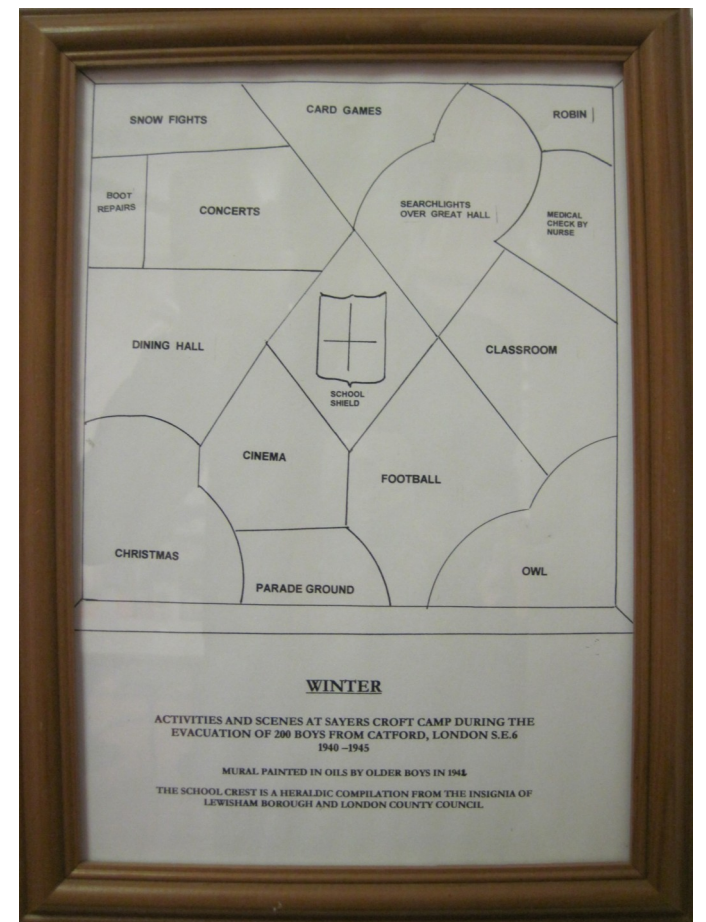
Harry Gell remembers being told that the buildings would last for twenty-five years, due to resin in the cedar wood which they are made from. Thanks to dedicated maintenance and caring visitors, they have actually lasted more than 75 years.



The Dining Hall is now a Grade II listed building, which means it is protected by law.



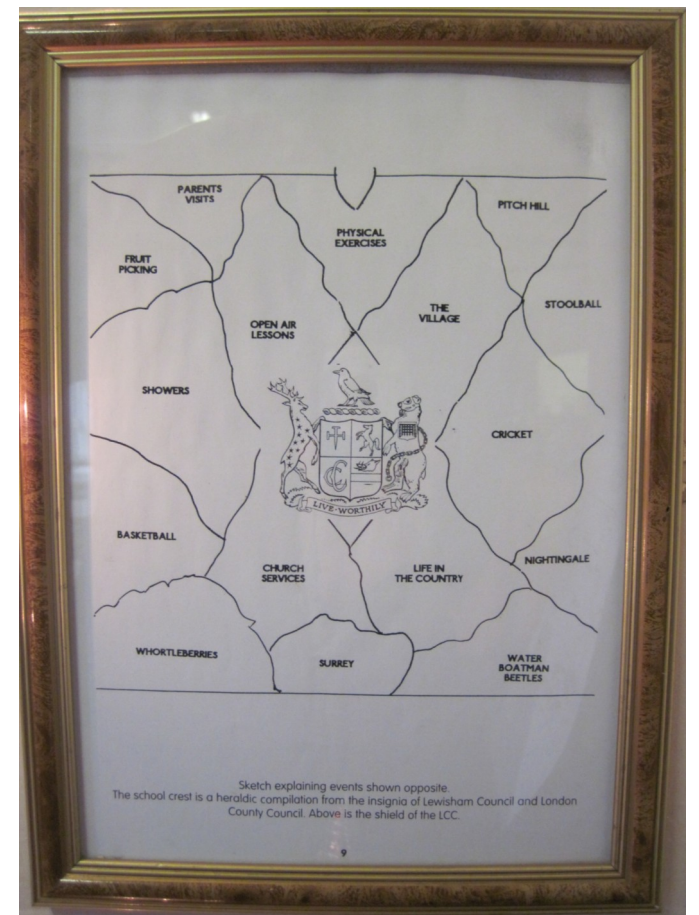
These pictures show the murals in the dining hall, painted by the boys in 1942 to commemorate their time at Sayers Croft. The smaller pictures explain what is shown in each section of the murals.



The murals were restored and are now protected and registered as war memorials. In the picture above is Len Davies, designer of the winter mural, at the rededication ceremony in 2003.



The murals show scenes of everyday life at “Camp”, both in summer (below) and winter (opposite page).



They are still enjoyed by visiting groups today, and serve as a reminder of the rich history of the site and its beginnings.



**Thank you** for reading this book, we hope you have enjoyed it and found it interesting. If you have any questions about the history of Sayers Croft from 1939 to the present day, please feel free to ask a member of the Sayers Croft team.

We would like to thank all those who have provided the photographs and other resources which made the production of this book possible, including Steve Ford for his pictures of Sayers Croft.

We would also like to thank the West Sussex Records Office for permission to reproduce the image “Garland N18703”.

Written and compiled by Joshua Hill, Assistant Instructor—2013-14.





