

## Cecilia Robertson (née Cochrane)

*Rusko House, near Gatehouse of Fleet, was used to house a number of refugees during WWII. The owners were Commander Arthur and Mrs Beryl Cochrane. Among their offspring was Cecilia who grew up at Rusko.*

*Cecilia Robertson (now married) wrote a small booklet about her life and what follows is a series of excerpts which refer to the evacuees.*

### My childhood home

In the hills above the house there was a burn; not as in Ashley! My father was an ingenious man; he had always wanted to try his hand at hydro-engineering. So he set about planning his great project: to dam the burn and make a large loch, piping the water down the hill with sufficient head to operate an electrical generator. This was completed in 1931, at a total cost of four thousand pounds; a lot of money in those days. We had 'free' electricity for the house, all the cottages, and the home farm. This allowed the farm to install a state-of-the-art milking machine; look no hands! The Electricity Board wanted to run power lines through the estate and offered my father electricity for 1/4 penny per unit. He laughed; "*I can have it for nothing*". The lines were put up anyway, and the Board paid the estate for the privilege. While all this work was going on, my brothers chased eels in the burn for the foreman, who was a very stout gentleman, and my sisters chased after the linesmen! Fun for all. Seventy-five years on, the hydro-electric scheme still works well; a great credit to my father.

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Sometimes during the summer, water was scarce. Further up the hillside there was another burn, which was dammed and the water piped to the loch. For the last fifty yards the water had to run uphill. "Amazing", everyone remarked, "how clever". The source was above the outlet. Beside my father's bed there was a large box with a huge lever, which when operated, turned off the turbine and shut off the water. We called it 'The Blacker' because then all was in darkness. Early in the morning, 'The Blacker' was reconnected in time for the milking. There was a huge washing machine to cope with the family laundry; big roller irons and a walk-in drying cupboard. We children did not appreciate how extremely fortunate we were.

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Before the War we had several members of staff to run the house, but they were nearly all 'called up'. Then the Evacuees from Glasgow descended on us, sixteen of them, with 'helpers', who were more trouble than the children! The helpers did not like the country and soon went home, leaving us to get on with it. My two eldest sisters were members of the Voluntary Aid Detachment and wore fancy uniforms with Red Crosses on their ample bosoms. My father was in the A.R.P.

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When I first came to Dumfries I lived in digs, close to the wash house. My landlady was very good to me but hot water was still a rare commodity. As soon as you had run your 'legal five inches', it ran cold. At home this problem never arose because of unlimited free electricity and plenty of water.

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You could splash away to your heart's content. In a lot of ways we hardly knew there was a war on. The garden produced excellent fresh fruit and vegetables. The river was filled with

salmon and trout; and the estate was home to all varieties of game. The farm provided us with fresh milk, butter, cream, and eggs. My father cherished several hives of rather wild, Italian bees. I spent many happy hours separating honey and 'smoking' the bees to try and lull them into a more placid frame of mind. I remember my brother yelling his head off when a "dirty bee" crawled up his pants and found a tasty bite!

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As it was still wartime, my mother did not want me to leave home to go to University or into the Forces, (we would probably have lost the war!), so I became a highly-qualified estate secretary, bookkeeper, wages clerk, you name it, in a 'reserved occupation'; not to be called up to serve King and Country. I worked in an office in the village and cycled to work every day.

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I would cycle home at lunchtime with huge bags of messages, always uphill against the wind, and then back again in the afternoon. I had to pass a farm yard where lurked an enormous collie dog who lay in wait to watch my fat thighs struggling past. He used to chase me, but one-day temptation was too much and he sank his teeth into my very solid bottom, knocking me off my bicycle and cutting my knee quite badly. Enough was enough. I complained to the village copper, a bright cherry-faced young man, who decided to come out to the house to examine the damage. He asked me to lift up my skirt and show him my bum. On the point of obeying the arm of the law, one quick look at his bright twinkling eyes and I decided discretion was the better part of valour, and replaced my trembling skirt promptly. My knee went septic and I caught the evacuee's boils; what a mess. My eldest sister, the one with the Red Cross on her bosom, was requested by the doctor to put a kaolin poultice on my knee. This needed to be warmed to blood-heat. In her enthusiasm she brought it nearly to the boil and applied it to my leg. When I screamed, she told me not to be such a coward! When I went back to the doctor, he said, *"My God, who did this?" It was a disaster area.*

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We still had the sixteen evacuees living with us. In my spare time I helped to feed them, wash them, and patch and darn their clothes. I also searched their heads for lice, treated their boils, scabies, impetigo, and put ointment in all sorts of places I did not know existed, on sometimes not so little boys. I usually approached from behind as it was safer! The biggest expenditure was paying the village cobbler to repair their boots and shoes. Their parents never had any money to buy them new ones.

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The trouble was that the house was exactly two miles from the school, and the Education Department refused to let the children catch the school bus, even though it passed right by the lodge gates. It would have needed a much bigger bus, as there were so many of them.

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They had to walk the two miles each way to and from school every day, with dire damage to their shoes; because they had to kick stones, of course, didn't they?

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I vividly remember late at night in the blackout going with a candle and one match (they were very scarce) to 'pot' the "bed wetters." Until I became more skilled, the little boys invariably peed on the candle. If it happened more than once per night I got rather cross. There was one family of four who at home had all slept in the same bed, like sardines. Now they all had separate beds. When the little girls found out who was wetting her bed, they crowed like anything because at

home they had their bums skelped for doing the damage, now they knew for certain that it was their big sister.

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We really worked incredibly hard during the war; most people did. To make matters worse, the powers that be decided we were having it too easy, and called up my second sister to work in a munitions factory near Glasgow. She enjoyed the work, but did not like having to share her bed with the night shift, who got up as she crawled into bed. At least it was warm, if not very hygienic. We had been accustomed to watching Dad working both a wood lathe and a metal lathe, so we knew how it should be done. My sister found the work interesting, and would make herself very unpopular with the other workers because she wanted to go on after the `hooter' went for mealtimes, just so that she could finish what she was doing. Is that a blackleg?