

*Atworth*  
*A People's History*



Recollections of a Wartime  
Evacuee  
By Dorit Bader Whiteman



Right – Dorit outside cottage Bath Road, Atworth.  
1939



## *Introduction*

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Almost seventy years ago when the Second World War was about to begin, and knowing that enemy planes would drop bombs on our country, the Government had made plans for children who lived in many of the large cities to be sent to the safety of the countryside. This plan was named '**Operation Pied Piper**' and began on September 1<sup>st</sup> 1939 when one and a quarter million people, mainly children, were relocated.

People who wanted to send their sons and daughters from danger registered the names with the child's school. Parents were sent a list of items the children had to take with them. This included – 2 of each item of undergarments and 2 pairs of socks. For boys, pyjamas, trousers, shirts and pullover. For girls, nightdresses, slips, blouses, frocks and cardigan. Each child should have a warm coat, 2 pairs of boots or shoes, 6 handkerchiefs, face flannel, toothbrush, 2 towels and a comb. Parents were also asked to ensure that each child had enough food for one days travelling.

Childs Gas Mask.



Having arranged through the school which child should be evacuated '**Operation Pied Piper**' began on Friday September 1<sup>st</sup> 1939. On that day the children all had a brown luggage label attached to them giving name and address and each carried a small suitcase or bag and a gas

mask. The children were taken to assembly points where teachers took charge of them. It must have been a sad time for many children parting from their parents and not knowing when they would see them again. However for some it was an adventure, as none knew where they were going. Most children travelled by train, others by coach or bus to unknown places and people.

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# *Atworth - A People's History*



An account of a wartime evacuee.

My sincere thanks to all contributors

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Photographs – The National Archives



## *The Blitz*

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The Blitzkrieg, the German word for lightning, known in Britain as 'The Blitz' began on September 7<sup>th</sup> 1940 when the German Air Force, the 'Luftwaffe', bombed London for fifty-seven consecutive nights. During twenty-four nights 5,300 tons of explosives was dropped on London. Other industrial and military cities were also subjected to heavy air raids including my own city of Bristol in the West Country. These attacks lasted for eight months in which time 43,000 civilians were killed, half of these in London and in that city alone one million houses was damaged or destroyed.



"Children of an eastern suburb of London, who have been made homeless by the random bombs of the Nazi night raiders, waiting outside the wreckage of what was their home." September 1940."  
Photograph - The National Archives.

The Blitz was intended to force Britain into surrendering thereby allowing Germany to invade our country. But the British bull-dog spirit and the rousing speeches made by Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, kept us determined not to give in.

People came together as never before – throughout the country civilians, unable to serve in the military, became members of the 'Home Guard', the 'Auxiliary Fire Service' and other organizations. Lads and men were drafted to work 'down the mines' replacing coalminers who were in the fighting force. These were known as 'Bevin Boys'.

Corrugated steel shelters were provided to those with gardens. These were small hut-like constructions, which were covered with earth. They proved to be cold and damp and totally inadequate. In my home when the drone of aircraft was heard we huddled under the dining table that was pulled up to the chimney-breast. In those days

under the stairs and by the chimney-breast were considered the safest place in a house



London Underground station during the Blitz.  
Photograph The National Archives.

When bombs began to fall on London it became imperative that people had some refuge during the night. With little shelter available gradually people began to go to the underground. Soon sixty thousand Londoners went to a tube station each night sleeping side by side on the platforms.

Throughout the war a 'Blackout' was imposed. At night street lights went out and all windows were covered so that enemy aircraft could not use the lights as targets. Air Raid Wardens patrolled the streets and if a glimmer of light could be seen from anyone's property the cry "Put that light out" was clearly heard.



## *Children who came to Atworth.*

From an entry made in the School Log Book dated September 1939 (see photograph below) we are fortunate to discover the number of children who came from London to Atworth.

The entry reads –

“Sept. Opened school today nine days later than anticipated on account of the outbreak of war.

The numbers on roll today are made up as follows:-

Atworth Children 76

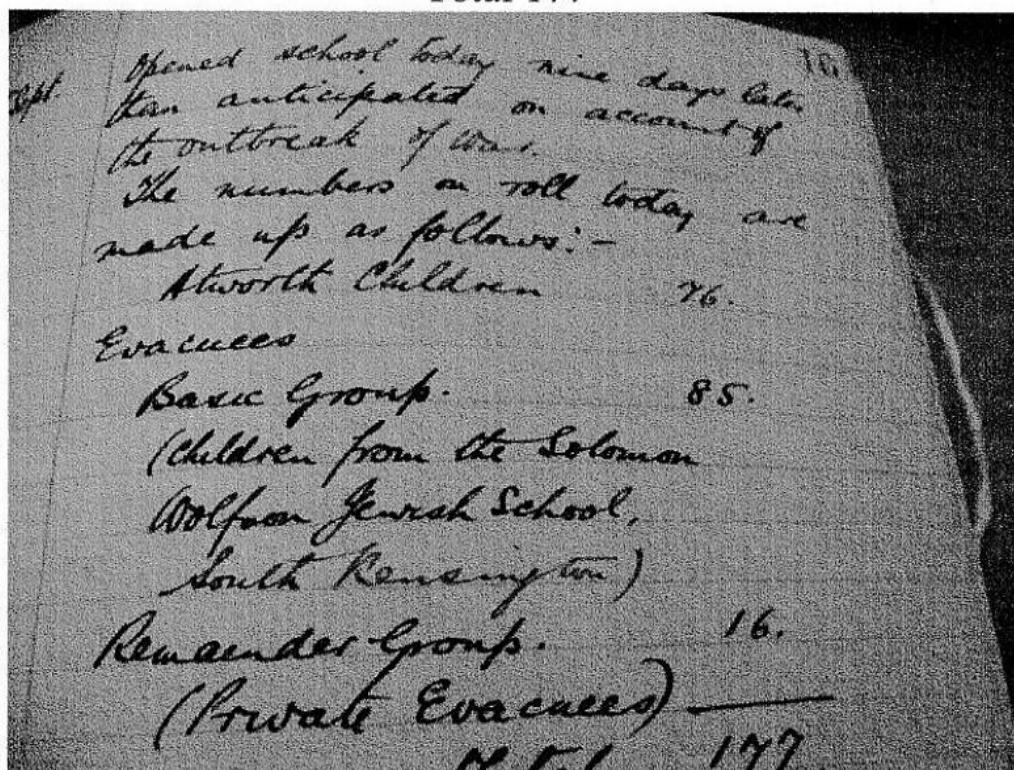
Evacuees

Basic Group 85

(Children from the Solomon Wolfson Jewish School,  
South Kensington)

Remainder Group 16 (Private Evacuees)

Total 177”



The entry continues – “The Church Hall is now being used to accommodate 2 classes and there are 114 children in the school building and 63 in the Church....” (See photograph next page)

The Church Hall is now being used  
to accommodate 2 classes  
and there are 114 children in the  
school building and 63 in the church

We know that teachers had escorted the Jewish children from their school in Kensington and that the Church Hall, then a corrugated iron construction, had been set-aside as schoolrooms. Sixteen children from the East End of London were also in the party and these took lessons in the school.

From a report printed in the newspaper 'Wiltshire Times' of September 1939 you will read an account about the children who were welcomed to Atworth. There are also photographs of evacuees arriving at Trowbridge Railway Station. You will note that most of the children carried their belongings in a bag or even tied up in a bundle. However, all had a box containing a gas mask slung over their shoulders.



Children arriving at Trowbridge Railway Station

## *Atworth - From Town to Country*

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Last Saturday about 250 Jewish children from North Kensington left London for an unknown destination. Anxiously they watched the stations flash by, wondering where that destination was to be, and it proved to be Melksham. Here they were received with the utmost courtesy. Boy Scouts and helpers rendered every assistance and conducted them to St. Michael's School Hall where a much-appreciated meal was awaiting them. But this was not to be their destination, for after the distribution of two days rations buses arrived and conducted them to the surrounding villages of Holt, Broughton Gifford and Atworth.

At Atworth the kindness of all was amazing, children were willingly taken into homes and it was easy to see from the faces of all that they were thoroughly happy. None could be persuaded to express a wish to return to London.

Country conditions were certainly strange at first, but now all have settled down and made friends with the village children and are enjoying walks, games, and exploring the countryside before work begins in earnest next week.

All from London would like to express their gratitude to the Rev. O. R. Eurich, Chief Billeting Officer, and his lady helpers, Mesdames Baker, Price, Pearce and Burry, who so kindly helped in the evacuation. Mention should also be made of Mr. T.W. Hobday, the Headmaster and his staff, and the whole village for a welcome that will never be forgotten.

Atworth is one of very few villages that can boast of an Institute containing baths, games etc. and a recreation field 6½ acres in extent, including a children's enclosure with a number of amusements, the latest being a revolving platform which was erected a fortnight ago at a cost of £35.

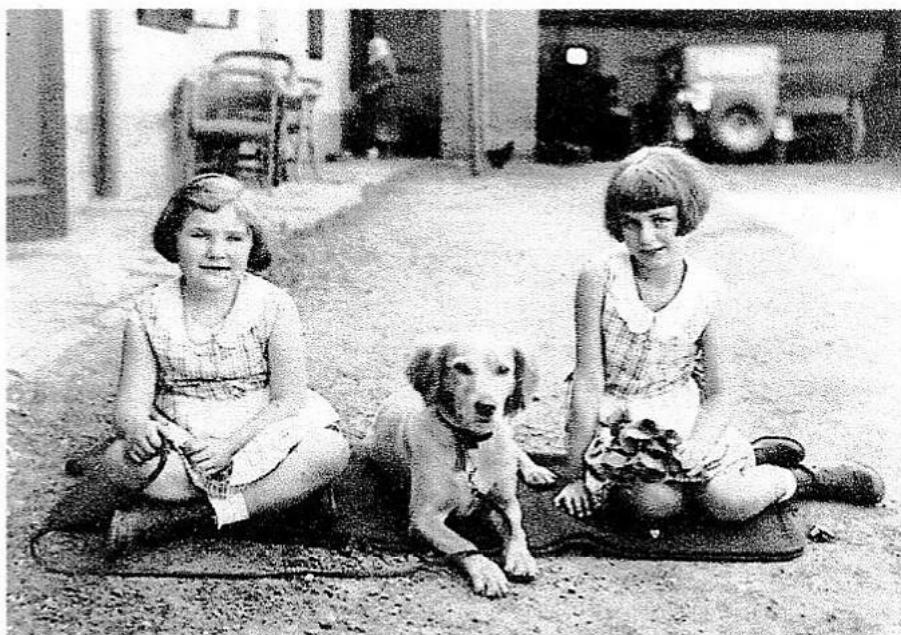
Great credit is due to the Parish Council and the Institute Committee combined for their splendid efforts in this direction.

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## *Dorit's Story*

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Indeed the fact I am still alive has a great deal to do with the decision the English Government made to help rescue some of the beleaguered Jews under Hitler. I spent over one year in Atworth but before that I had led a comfortable and happy life in Vienna with parents of some renown. My father was a practicing physician and my mother held a Ph.D. in chemistry, having been one of the first women in Vienna to achieve that degree. She was also the owner and director of a private school for girls which was known all over Europe as being forward looking and advanced for its time.



Dorit & her  
sister with  
great uncle's  
dog Tokey.

In one night, March 1938 all this was wiped out and my parents were looking for a possible way out of the prison, which was Austria and where the outlook for the future was entirely black. In fact, death by the hands of the Nazis was waiting. A frantic search began, but all borders were closed. Being Jewish was a death sentence. It was then that my parents saw an exit sign. It was from the British government, which permitted Jews to enter the country if they were willing to work in positions, which could not be filled from the local population. My mother, Dr. Lily Bader, accepted a job as a maid in England. With this permit in hand, her two daughters and her husband were allowed to accompany her. Leaving everything they owned except for a tiny suitcase and ten shillings, the family left, not looking back.



Dorit & friend Lily in Austria

The arrival was breathtaking. Instead of the brutal SS, there were friendly policemen. Instead of "Jews and dogs not allowed" there were welcoming faces and helpful hands. A boarding school in Kent offered me a scholarship in a school called Waterside, Westgate-on-Sea, a name that seemed most romantic to me. I was struck by the generous, fair-handed way the children were treated, the sportsmanship, the honesty, the cultural atmosphere. I was thrilled when I won a prize, which said: "To Dorit – for industry." After one year, I spoke English fairly fluently but the wonderful interlude came to an end. The school was closed because of its dangerous location. As a result, I was swept up in Operation Pied Piper, which led me to Atworth.

I do not remember the exact day in September 1939 when the great evacuation called Operation Pied Piper started, nor the school I traveled with, nor the number of children on the train, nor the railroad station where the train finally stopped. It might have been Melksham. I knew I was leaving London because of the possibility of being bombed by the Germans but I knew nothing about our destination nor

with whom I would be living. When the train stopped we were told to get off. Each one of us took our little suitcase, our identification card, checked that we were wearing our label, suspended on a kind of rope across our necks, and grabbed the little cardboard box which contained our gas mask. We had learned to hang on to it because in London, if you failed to carry it, a policeman could send you home. In case of an air attack he would have to give you his gas mask if you were without it. I do remember after all the children disgorged from the train standing by myself on the platform. The English government had appealed to families who lived in safer areas in England to take in city children and the good citizens had responded en masse. As a result, when our train arrived, many adults were milling on the platform, looking to take one or two children home with them. After a short while a lady approached me, and I was told to accompany her. It was Mrs. Clark in whose house I was to live for about a year.



The Jubilee Clock Tower – built in 1897 to celebrate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the reign of Her Majesty Queen Victoria.

We were all city children. I was a double refugee. And now I was again being transported to a strange setting. The new setting seemed very friendly to me. We walked down what seemed to me the main street of the village. As we walked to Mrs. Clark's cottage, she stopped at a friend's house. She remarked that she had heard that the train had Jewish children on it and inquired if they were brown. It was clear that the village had never encountered Jewish children before.

Nor had most of the children encountered a village of that nature before because they lived in London and some of them even in the East End.

After the big city, Atworth looked charming and picturesque, almost like a movie setting: Small attached houses, little gardens fronting them, a clock tower and at the end of the road a church. I entered Mrs. Clark's home with wonder and a little trepidation. It was very different from the ones in Vienna and London I had lived in. The rooms were quite small and there were not many of them. A petite but cozy living room containing a dining room table, a couch, some chairs and a fireplace was the place where the family, myself included, spent evenings by kerosene light, since there was no electricity. The adjoining, neatly arranged kitchen had no taps because there was no water in the house. Mrs. Clark fetched the water from outside for everyone's needs – for cooking, drinking, washing, and for the once-a-week bath. Two small bedrooms upstairs served five of us. Mr. and Mrs. Clark and baby Roland were in one room; Mrs. Clark's sister and I were in the other one. There was no bathroom. Since there was no water in the house there was no need.



For washing up we had a basin and pitcher, filled by Mrs. Clark. The outhouse in the back garden fulfilled its appointed function. (The outhouse refers to the 'bucket closet' an outside lavatory.)

Basin & Pitcher

The responsibility the local citizens assumed by taking in strange children was enormous. Some had accepted two or even three children and suddenly without any guidance or experience they found themselves foster parents. Youngsters, who had been removed without warning from their parents, had marched into their homes with habits and ways of living with which the new foster parents were frequently unfamiliar, and which changed the rhythm of their own lives. There were families who never had children of their own.

Others were busy with their own, and some had children who were already grown and gone. Yet new chores were added to their lives, such as time for supervising their foster children, particularly the younger ones who were disoriented and afraid. Many times rooms had to be reorganized to create space for the new guests. Yet without apparent complaints, the local people accommodated the refugee children.



Ethel Clarke

Mr. Clark's mother and sisters, (Ethel & Marion) lived across the street. The unmarried sisters took in six year old twin brothers. The youngsters cried through the first night, feeling lost and missing their parents. Mr. Clark's sister stayed up with them and consoled them with warm sympathy.

Suddenly the streets of Atworth were filled with strange children – running, investigating, playing, and interrupting the pulse of the village life. But everyone was motivated by the desire to pull together for the war effort. The adults felt it with passionate patriotism and even the children sensed that they should not complain under the circumstances.

The daily routine started with school in the morning. The number of school age evacuee children approximately matched the number of local school children. Since there was no space in the village school, classes were held for us in a Quonset hut (a pre-fabricated building). It consisted of just one big room for all of us, from the youngest – about six years – to a few children who were about fifteen or sixteen. Not much can be said for the instruction we received. We not only had no books but we also did not have sufficient teachers. As a result the older youngsters were drafted to teach the younger children. That resulted in pandemonium and was soon abandoned. My main memory is the discomfort of the Quonset hut. It varied from boiling hot to freezing cold. In mid-winter we wore our coats, scarves and gloves with which we skipped in a circle once an hour to keep warm.

I don't remember getting homework. When school was over for the day, no one paid any further attention to us.



The Church Hall described by Dorit as a 'Quonset Hut'  
Front row centre – Mrs Clark Senior. Far right Ernest's sister, Joan.

We usually spent the afternoons playing outside by ourselves. Twice a week or so a truck arrived, a library on wheels, which many of us eagerly awaited. I remember reading "Dorothy of Haddon Hall" in which sex scenes were not exactly overwrought. I remember the scene that described the hero's intense passion when he spied his loved ones ankle as she mounted into her carriage. There were also magazines which were read by the older girls and sometimes pilfered by the younger ones. The stories were usually more or less the same and tended to be about star-crossed lovers. The heroine was generally in danger of losing her "most valued treasure" but was always rescued in time by some benevolent man or even by herself, thus escaping a fate worse than death.

Some of the children were boarded in the neighboring village, Broughton Gifford. I somehow found a back way over meadows to

reach it I had become friendly with a boy and once in a while we visited each other and played happily together. Sunday was always a big treat. On frequent Sundays there was a wedding between a local girl and her soldier fiancée. We waited patiently until the couple emerged from the church and joined in the admiring cheers of the onlookers. None of us children had cameras, so we could not record these festive occasions. I do not remember ever being bored. But some of the older girls were, particularly one. I don't recall her name, but she was a great deal more sophisticated than the rest. She talked about boyfriends she had had in London. One day a young man in a convertible stopped his car on the road where she was walking and talked to her. Oh, what a scandal! That Jezebel! Tongues wagged immediately with outrage. She explained that the young man was an old acquaintance who had recognized her and therefore stopped to talk to her. No one believed her except me. I thought it must be true because no one would be so depraved as to talk to a strange man – and in a car to boot!

In the afternoons I went "home" and Mrs. Clark sometimes, though unfailingly on Sundays, prepared a delicious tea which came accompanied by white bread and butter sliced thin, and a sultana cake for which I still yearn. With additional rationing that treat disappeared with time. In the evening, Mr. Clark came home from work. I did not know what his work was but felt it impolite to ask I

believe he was a bricklayer. A certain amount of formality reigned which never quite disappeared even though the atmosphere was very friendly. Mr. Clark and I formed a respectful but very warm friendship. I was most impressed with his sincerity, his honesty, his straightforwardness. In spite of my youth, I brought a whiff of the big



Ernest Clark

city to his home. I was used to discussing cultural and political issues with my parents and now I continued to do so with Mr. Clark. We both looked forward to our evening talks. He read the paper and

reported about the events and I was young enough to feel I had the right to express my opinions. We often agreed with each other. On the other hand, I sincerely regret that I was not a more considerate guest. I do not remember helping Mrs. Clark as much as I should have with household chores or after dinner with the dishes. While she went out the back door to fetch the water I think I frequently exited by the front door. She never reprimanded me. I think that is hard to do with children who are not your own.

We were more or less isolated in the village. Civilians were very much discouraged from traveling. There was a shortage of buses and trains. Street signs had been taken down so that in case of invasion, the Germans would be disoriented. Everything and everyone had to be dedicated to the war effort. Of course, homes did not have telephones. One had to call from a public phone but it was such an expensive and complicated business that was reserved for serious emergencies. During the year I was in Atworth, my father came once from London and got along famously with the Clark family. It was a great occasion. When one considers that these days it is possible to commute to London from Atworth, it is hard to imagine how far away that city seemed to us

There were no social workers who investigated the suitability of the homes in which we were placed. No activities were planned for the afternoon. We were entirely left to our own devices. No one checked on the emotional adjustment of the little ones. That was left to foster parents to manage the best they could. The reasons for that neglect are easy to explain. For one thing, no one really gave much thought to the psychological adjustment of children. It was thought that if you feed a child, put a roof over its head and behave in a kindly manner, that nothing more is needed. That children have an inner life was not really considered. In addition there was a war on and there was a shortage of everything. When I was still in London, I saw soldiers marching with sticks over their shoulder because the army lacked sufficient rifles. Manpower was short. There were no social workers, even if they existed, to spare. No frills were available. The incredible effort of collecting thousands of children, loading them on trains organizing

their arrivals in different cities and working out some payment for the foster parents can be considered a monumental achievement.



Front row centre Dorit with members of the Clark family.  
1939

I remember four outstanding events. One was my fifteen minutes of fame. We were playing in the fields when suddenly a swarm of wild horses galloped towards us. Ethel, Mr. Clark's sister, happened to be nearby and realized the danger. She stood opposite the horses and tried to head them off by screaming and waving her arms in big circles. At the same time she told the children to run away. We did so but at one point I turned to see her facing off the horses by herself.

I felt sorry for her and ran back to join her. We managed to divert the horses but my courage was the talk of the village for many days

The other event was less to my credit. Many of the women were knitting mufflers for the soldiers. From what I recall, they were fashioned from ugly gray wool and were miles long. I found the activity endlessly boring and was constantly seen carrying the incomplete scarf around, though it never grew in length. Finally various women took pity on me and finished that ugly snake of a scarf for me. I felt quite defeated and unpatriotic.

The third incident was of a darker nature. I was allowed to go to Melksham by myself to meet my father at the train station. To be sure to meet the train I left very early and had time to kill before my father's arrival. I found myself passing an old church and since I have always liked inspecting them as well as old gravestones, I walked through the gate. After a while, an elderly, benign looking man approached me. He entranced me by recounting the history of the church and asked me if I would like to see the bell on top of the bell tower. I certainly did and scampered up the narrow winding stairs. Once on top, the elderly, benign man muttered: "Can I embrace you?" I did not know exactly what he had in mind but I had the sense to know it was not something wholesome. I flew down the steps like the wind but never told anyone, feeling I had done something wrong by going to the church without permission. In after years, I thought the isolation of the cemetery could have been my grave.



Georgian shops Old Bond Street, Bath. 1939.

The fourth event had an amusing aspect. I don't know how I had the money to go on a bus to some nearby town. I believe it was Bath. I had heard that there was a medium that held regular séances, always starting on top of the hour. Did I sneak out without permission? I really don't recall. The bus arrived some minutes late. The door was already closed and I knocked. Big mistake! The group thought the spirits were knocking. When I entered, about six surprised, angry and disappointed faces gave me some very dirty looks.

After about a year, my stay ended as quickly as it had started. I was not surprised. My life had taken such unpredictable turns that nothing surprised me anymore. Within a little more than a year I had lived in two countries, lodged in three different apartments and attended three schools in three different places. It was no longer astonishing that a new phase was to begin. I said good-by to the Clarks, but as a youngster I did not realize how indebted I was to them. Fortunately, I was able to make amends when many years later I returned with my husband for a visit.

After my stay in Atworth, I returned to my parents. Since my father, a physician, as a refugee was not permitted to practice medicine in England, and since our quota number for the United States had come up, we were getting ready to go to New York. There my father was allowed to retake his medical exam and practice again in his profession. Mother worked as a consultant to a boarding school and subsequently in my father's office. I continued my education and received a doctor degree in psychology. I have been the director of a clinic, worked in private practice as a therapist and have written three books on the Holocaust. But in terms of memories, my two years in England will stand out forever in my mind. It allowed me to maintain my trust in mankind after living under Hitler's regime and losing friends and relatives in the Holocaust. The people of Atworth, with their humanity, their willingness to help, their indestructible belief in what is right, left a lasting impression in my life which will never be forgotten.



## *The Visit 1988*

We arrived by car and it seemed that half of Atworth was waiting for us with a jubilant welcome. "Baby Roland" was now quite grown up. Mrs. Clark awaited us with her wonderful sultana cake and Mr. Clark, wearing his best black suit took me for a walk to the church and to feed the pigs. Reminiscences were exchanged and someone retold the story of my adventure with Ethel and the wild horses, thus prolonging my fifteen minutes of fame. No one referred to my unfortunate muffler. It was then, now being older, that I fully realized the wonderful contribution of Atworth and its citizens. It took maturity on my part to recognize the enormous responsibility they had undertaken by caring for so many children with different backgrounds and different ages.

About two years ago, "Baby Roland", now retired, and his wife came to visit my husband and myself in New York. When he came down the ramp at Kennedy Airport, he looked exactly like his father, which touched my heart. He told me that his father, having only one son and no daughter, had hoped that I would continue to live with him and his wife, and that I would be the daughter he never had. I was deeply moved to learn that our affection had been mutual.



Ernest Clark's sister – Joan Thomsett.  
Atworth 2006.



Dorit with Roland & his mother, Ruby Clark  
Atworth 1988.



Dorit with Roland's, mother, wife & children Sally, Robert, Suzanne  
& Ruby Clark.

