

DUTCH CHILDREN AT GREGYNOG IN 1945 & 1946

During the Second World War Gregynog Hall was used as a Red Cross convalescent home under the leadership of Gwendoline and Margaret Davies. After the war they hosted holidays for groups of Dutch children: 30 young girls came in 1945 and nearly three times as many came the following year and drew pictures in the Visitors' Book. Gregynog, they wrote, was a happy home in which to spend part of their childhood and "it is for our Misses Davies that we sing this song of gratitude."



These children and their families had suffered terribly during the German occupation of their country, and had been brought to Britain for a holiday with good food, fresh air and freedom from fear. A reunion of those who were here was held at Gregynog in 1992, and since then many more have come back to visit, bringing their new families with them.

In 2003 Fia Gillon, now of Fredericksberg, Virginia, brought her husband Donald Tompkins to see the house she remembers so well, and shared her memories us.

Mrs Tompkins explored the gardens, which she remembered from her visit – especially the tunnel under the bridge, also the golden yew hedges. She said that the children were allowed to run free in the house and gardens. They loved to run up and down the long corridors on the first and second floors of the house and the Miss Davieses didn't mind a bit. They seemed to tolerate the noise and disruption. "They knew it was the first time in our lives that we had been able to run about and make a noise without fear of the consequences."

The Miss Davieses would occasionally host tea parties in their upstairs sitting room where you could look out of the windows over the gardens. Mrs Tompkins remembered being so excited when it was her turn to receive an invitation from these gentle, shy old ladies.

Mrs Tompkins had terrible memories of the starvation in Holland at the end of the war. There was nothing to eat except turnips, she remembered. Her grandparents died of starvation, like many other old people who gave whatever food came their way to their children and grandchildren.

The memorial booklet produced to celebrate the 1992 reunion contains extracts from the 1945 Group Leader Miss Cora Segeren's report to the Gregynog estate manager Major Burden Evans for the weekend of 17th August 1945.

SUNDAY 12th August

Father Beddoes [Newtown's Catholic Priest] came for our service, and the three Protestant children went again to the church in Llandinam. The children were not obedient last week, so we did not give the flag to one of the rooms. No one was really working hard for it.

So we had a reason for not giving our weekly concert. Next Sunday perhaps, it is our last Sunday in Gregynog Hall. Soon we will go back home. That is why we will give a big concert on the 19th August, as a present, whole in English language. In this way we thank Gregynog Hall for all goods they gave us.

The girls were looking forward to going home to Holland and being reunited with their families – those who had survived – but in the meantime they had some good news to celebrate.

Wednesday 15th August

Peace all over the world: Hip-Hip-Hurrah! At ten past eight we get the message about the news. Peace! World Peace! The children are shouting and cheering. It gives a nice change.

At ten o'clock we went by bus – arranged by Father Beddoes himself – to Newtown. We sang the service in the Catholic Church, and the Priest and people were very excited about it. When we went back through the town, we saw most of the people out-doors, smiling and happy. This brought us in the same atmosphere of pleasure, and we bought thirty two English flags, and came home singing and laughing.

The Misses Davies came in the same atmosphere. Our "Gregynog Hall" got flags and flowers and decorations. It has been a really festival-day. We won't forget 15th August 1945.