

Aunt Rachel's Letters from England 1941

Landsdowne House
Tonbridge, Kent
Jan 6th, 1941

Dear Family,

This has been a cheerful day, rejoicing over the capture of the 'Bardia' and feeling very pleased with the Australians. It must have been a wonderful piece of generalship.

Here I am in Tonbridge again, kind old Mrs. Such welcomed me back and runs round after me with glasses of hot milk all day because she thought I looked pale. As a matter of fact, I am quite well again but they said I must have a couple of teeth out, so I insisted on coming to my own dentist and they gave me leave for the purpose. He refused to take out more than one – said it wasn't necessary – so I was pleased. I had gas and shall never have a tooth out any other way if I can help it. It was quite pleasant!

Every morning when I look out my window, I congratulate myself on being here as it has been snowing hard for a week and I wouldn't have enjoyed plunging out into it in the early mornings. It is nothing like as heavy as last year, but still, it's pretty cold. It is very beautiful though; everything looks so different.

I wondered what you were all doing on Xmas day. I hope you had had some rain and weren't parched with heat.

I had quite a pleasant day. I was out of bed, but it was very cold for travelling and the train services were curtailed, so I stayed at the hospital till after the holidays. So that I shouldn't feel lonely in a room by myself the Matron suggested that I should help in the ward, just as much as I felt inclined to and we had a jolly day. The patients were in good spirits and enjoyed the Xmas tree and various little festivities arranged for them. On Boxing Day, the hospital gave the nurses a slap-up dinner, while the sisters carried on the work in the ward.

I expect I shall be back there next week, but I thought I might as well take a little spell while I had the chance, so I am not hurrying.

I went up to London yesterday to do a little shopping in the sales and to view the damage in the City after the incendiary raid of last week. It certainly must have been a glorious blaze! There are numbers of good-sized areas with every building gutted, but it is a marvel it didn't spread through the whole district. The fire services did wonderful work. Gracechurch Street, with my bank in it, was quite untouched, for which I was grateful as my passport and any valuables I have are in the safe there. St Paul's stands serenely unburnt, though practically every house immediately surrounding it is burnt. I saw a film the other day, which is sure to go out to you, giving a good idea of the blaze. The Guildhall, I fear, is beyond repair, though bits of the walls are standing still. Certain trades are very hard hit – they tend to congregate in the same parts – the soft-goods merchants (I think they deal in sheets and blankets etc) had their centre in the damaged part, and the booksellers too have had a bad time. Still, do not imagine that the whole of the City is wiped out, it is only patches here and there. My bank, which has only a skeleton staff in the London office, had one of the soft-goods merchants established and carrying on in their premises.

Housekeeping is getting very difficult – I feel glad I don't have to cope with it. The shortages occur suddenly and very often just locally due to transport difficulties. The meat ration is reduced to half worth this week, which seems to hit people hard. I don't think the English are very adaptable about food – they like things they've always been used to, and not to be able to have their two solid meat meals a day hurts them – also the meat substitutes such as eggs and cheese none too plentiful, and

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one can't eke things with fritters and things like that because of the shortage of frying fat. However, I find I am always provided somehow with satisfying meals, and at Xmas I don't believe anyone went without the usual fare, though a bit curtailed.

Well, love to you all, Rachel

Aunt Rachel's Letters from England 1941

Tonbridge

Jan 22nd, 1941

Dear Family,

I have very little news so this will just be a scribble.

I go back to Farnham to the hospital tomorrow, where I hear they are very short-handed and busy. I have had a lovely rest – had my teeth satisfactorily fixed up, had several trips to London, had a permanent wave, and am going back feeling quite cheerful. It has snowed on and off all this month – lovely for walking when it is fresh, and very sloppy when it is thawing.

I saw a couple of ballets in London – one lovely one “The Wise Virgins”. The wise virgins were very superior and smug, and the foolish ones delightfully foolish and inconsequent.

Today I am going to “The Great Dictator”.

Air activity has been much less. The concentrated incendiary raids must be rather terrifying, but they are learning to deal with them quickly and thoroughly.

Helen Taylor has beaten them out on the roof of her hospital several times.

They are battering at Tobruk today – so I hope tonight we shall have good news.

Much love to you all

Rachel

Aunt Rachel's Letters from England 1941

County Hospital
Farnham, Surrey
Feb 15th, 1941

Dear Family,

I have settled down to this busy life again and am liking it much better now. I am in a more interesting ward with quite nice staff, and more method, and also, I am getting used to the pretty rough conditions of life and am getting the hang of the work. At first it was very hard to find out what was expected of me as no-one ever had time to explain anything, but I learned by my mistakes and now feel more or less at home. There seems to be a shortage of nurses, in contrast to the oversupply of masseuses, so I expect I shall stick to this for a while now.

There is a bit of spring in the air the last few days which make all the difference to one's outlook. The air is not so piercingly cold, and the black-out does not last so long. I still have to find my way here by torchlight in the mornings, but the evenings are getting much lighter.

I have thought about changing my billet to somewhere nearer the hospital, but I have got used to the long walk now and rather like it, and the two Miss Andrews with whom I live are extremely kind. Also, I can have unlimited hot baths, which are sometimes a difficulty and I have an electric point in my room and a radiator. So, I think I'll stay where I am.

My Xmas parcels arrived all together on Feb 1st and I am enjoying all the good things in them. We are really very well fed here considering everything, but a few extras do make a nice change. All the jams you can buy seem to taste the same as they all appear to be made with a basis of apple. If I want to have a meal in my billets on my day off it is quite hard to buy anything, as the shops will only sell a small quantity of eggs, cheese etc to the people registered with them for their rations and you have no hope of just walking in and getting some.

The latest rather alarming shortage is face-creams and powders! They are unobtainable in this district, but I believe can still be bought in London.

On my last day off I went to Winchester by bus – a pretty run of 2 hours. I hoped to meet Susie there, but she was prevented from coming at the last minute.

Yesterday Helen Taylor came down from London and spent the day. It was nice to see her. She seems very happy with her work at a London Hospital.

There are some nice girls on the nursing staff. The nicest one unfortunately left last week. The VHD's and Auxiliaries like myself come from all sorts of places and jobs. One is an opera singer and a very nice girl on my ward has been an interpreter in Central Europe for the last 5 years and speaks 7 languages. Most of them, though, are rough good-hearted Irish girls. They are having a grand time with hundreds of soldiers, mostly Canadian and New Zealand billeted round about. Aldershot is only 3 miles away.

The situation in the Balkans seems very critical, and Australia must be watching Japan anxiously. Ethel Stuckey said to me some months ago that she thought she'd go home soon as she believed the centre of war was going to move away from England and she didn't think there was any great need to stay. It looks as if she might be right. I believe all the casualties from the Sudan are being sent to South Africa not back here.

Wavell's action has been most spectacular and thrilling, hasn't it?

Love to everyone,
Rachel

Aunt Rachel's Letters from England 1941

County Hospital
Farnham, Surrey
March 18th, 1941

Dear Bunny and David,

Your parcel arrived a week or so ago and I am thrilled with the cardigan. It is a perfect fit and just the right colour to go with my things. It also has a particularly nice neck which suits me, so I am very pleased. I suppose Bun chose it – she is a very good picker. Thank you ever so much. Also thank you for the Xmas cable which I was very pleased to get. I thought of you all on Xmas morning with probably a Xmas tree on the veranda.

I went up to London last week to say goodbye to Ethel Stuckey. I hate the idea of her going just now – the sea is a most dangerous spot, but she was most anxious to get away before, having been here 2 years as she thought there might be difficulties in leaving. I hadn't heard it, but she tells me men aren't allowed to leave after that time and the same might apply to women. Also, she is rather homesick and not very keen on her job and she doesn't think there is any desperate shortage of nurses here yet. So, she is going back and if it seems desirable, will enlist with the AIF nurses out there. She has said for a long time that the centre of the war is going to move away from England, and she may be right.

Anyway, I think I will stay till summer and see how things are then.

I hope you have weathered the drought alright. It must have been grim from all accounts. The last letter said it seemed by the papers to have rained on the NW slopes.

I hope the boys are well. I loved the last snaps, showing how much they had grown. I suppose you have again been facing the problem of whether to send John to school or not.

I hope Mrs Bowling is better and happily settled at Glen Leigh.

There doesn't seem to be much news. I am very busy, and the weeks fly by. I quite like the work now and am quite happy though I wish I had a little more leisure. The life seems to suit me, as I am very well.

I don't seem to have any news these days as one week is very much like another. The air has been fairly quiet lately, though the last few nights we have heard the bombers going over pretty steadily. They haven't bothered to leave anything here though.

The weather is warming up which is a great relief. It hasn't been a very severe winter, but I have had to be out in it at unpleasant times which made me notice it.

Much love to you all,
Rachel

County Hospital
Farnham, Surrey
March 21st, 1941

Dear Family,

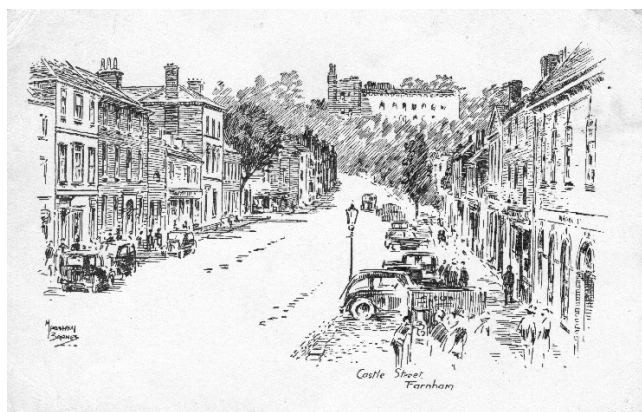
I know I have neglected you lately, but I didn't realise how badly until I came to write. The weeks just fly by. I grudge spending any of my time off writing letters, and my daily 2 hours goes just nowhere! Sometimes I sit down and start to read the paper and drop off to sleep and there it is wasted! Other times I can't resist getting out for a breath of air, after the much-heated wards in spite of letters calling to be written. And then there are always necessary bits of mending, shopping etc to be done. However, I must manage better in future.

I am very well – the busy, regular life seems to suit me, and I am liking the work now. I think I'll stay here for a few months but will try eventually to get moved to an orthopaedic hospital where the work will be more interesting for me. I don't regret the nursing experience at all, it has been interesting to see things from a different angle.

They are mustering up all the women now, so I may feel before long that there are plenty of people to do all the work here, particularly if the war doesn't get any more intense in England. In that case I should probably come home at the end of this year, but I haven't made up my mind yet.

I always make good use of my days off. Last week I went to Reading for the day and met Dorothy Gurner (Daisy Osborne's cousin). She has a volunteer job in Reading hospital looking after the card index. The week before I went up to London to have a farewell lunch with Ethel Stuckey. I suppose she has left by now. I'm afraid she has chosen a very bad time to leave. I heard of someone today who after a week at sea was landed at home again - I suppose the risks were considered too great. We had a nice day together and went to see an excellent performance of "Dear Brutus". I went up the night before so as to have plenty of time there and was lucky in striking a very peaceful night. London looked pretty much the same. I was interested to see the tube dwellers again. They looked very much more at home there than when I saw them last. They have their places booked now – either in 3 tier bunks ranged along the walls, or a space on the platform where they make up their beds, spreading newspapers then, perhaps, a bit of old carpet, and then a few cushions and blankets. They seemed to be spending the evening quite contentedly with their knitting or playing cards and they can buy their supper there. The canteen girls walk along the lines filling their mugs from huge watering cans of tea or coffee.

The raids have not been so bad lately. Certainly, Farnham is very peaceful. We hear them overhead pretty often at night, but they never stop here. They have been concentrating on ports.



After all this time I am beginning to take an interest in my surroundings, and I learn that Farnham is an interesting old town. They have very complete records of it back to the time of the Norman conquests, and particularly about the time of John and Henry III when the barons were so powerful. The old castle which dominates the town was originally the home of the Bishops of Winchester, but now he lives nearer to the cathedral and the Bishop of

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Guildford lives here. I am reading an interesting book about it all written by the local RC priest who is a learned student of mediaeval times. Many of the buildings, mills etc are still standing, and it is interesting to compare the conditions of living, farming methods, expenses, etc with these times. As the weather improves, I shall do some exploring on my bicycle.

Rationing of jam has come in this week – 8oz per month. As I easily use 16oz per week, I won't like it much, but I have a very nice little store in reserve from my Xmas parcels, so I am luckier than most people. It is hard on the children, who have to do with a good deal of filling up on bread. Treacle and golden syrup are included in the ration.

The shortages are often only temporary. The butter ration has been increased to 4oz this week, though the total fat ration, including cooking fat, remains the same – 8oz per week.

I found I was able to buy face-creams in London. The production has been reduced to 25% of the normal, but the smaller amount will be appearing at regular intervals.

They are producing a rayon stocking instead of the silk, which doesn't look bad.

The shops were full of pretty clothes – spring hats etc.

Love to you all,

Rachel

Aunt Rachel's Letters from England 1941

Wortley Cottage, Wortley
Wotton-under-Edge
Gloucestershire
April 30th, 1941

Dear Family,

I am having a few days holiday between jobs. I said goodbye to Farnham a few days ago, spent a night with Susie and a night in London and then came here to the Humphrey Lloyds. Humphrey is in the army and Crewdson, the eldest boy, was at preparatory school near here, so Becky brought the rest of the family to a cottage nearby. One of her sisters is also here with her 2 children. They have a charming cottage, and they like to take a PG in their spare room to help make ends meet. I am enjoying it very much. Gloucestershire is very lovely – all steep green hills, grey stone cottages and magnificent trees. It is quite new country to me.

I saw Helen in London. She has just come to an end of her job too and has got a very good appointment for a new one. She has a few days to spare, so I have persuaded her to come here too and she arrives tomorrow. London has had a couple of bad blitzes lately which must have been very nerve racking and of course they mean busy nights for her attending to casualties. She was quite cheerful though, in spite of it all.

I got my invitation to Farnham Castle the day before I left and went there for tea and saw all over it. It is a most interesting old place, the home of the bishop of Winchester from about 1100 to 1800. Much of the architecture is pure Norman though it has been added to at different periods ever since and so is an awful jumble of styles. It has been tastefully and cleverly modernised and furnished in recent years. The moat makes a charming sunken garden surrounding it. Much of the furniture is old and interesting. There is a chair in the chapel presented by Charles II to his friend Bishop Morley who lived there. In order to make it more episcopal he had a carved bishop's mitre added to the top of the back, but two voluptuous nude ladies carved in the arms look rather out of the picture.

When I arrived at Susie's they had just made the tragic discovery that a fox had killed 5 of her 12 precious fowls. In view of the meat position, we could not waste the mutilated corpses so spent the morning hacking off the useable bits which made a very good stew.

There was a raid on Portsmouth, 6 miles away, that night. The guns sounded very loud to me, but Rosemary assured me it was very mild. The whole sky was lit up by the fires and we could see the flames. Portsmouth has had a bad time. It is hard the way the same places get hammered again and again while in others they hardly know there is a war on. Most country places are very peaceful. The ports and industrial towns, of course, have to expect it.

I suppose you heard Mr Churchill's speech on Sunday night. It was grave, but on the whole encouraging, and was as cheerful as we had any right to expect. Things are certainly very grim just now. I am waiting anxiously to hear if they have got the Anzacs away from Greece successfully. I'm afraid it will be harder than Dunkirk, even.

It is comforting that America is bucking up and helping with the shipping problem in the Atlantic.

Love to you all,
Rachel

Aunt Rachel's Letters from England 1941

St Nicholas' and St Martin's Orthopaedic Hospital
Pyrford, near Woking
Surrey
May 16th, 1941

Dear Family,

I have been here a fortnight now and am settling down well. It is a very nice hospital, really a 'Waifs and Strays' home for crippled children but for the war it has been enlarged with extra temporary buildings to take soldiers and adult civilians. All the cases are orthopaedic and some of the leading surgeons in that line are there, so I have the opportunity of seeing some very good work. As far as nursing goes it is rather dull, as the patients are mostly healthy people and, after their operations are usually popped into plaster of Paris splints, so there is not a great deal to do for them. Serving meals and housework occupy most of my time, but I am able to watch the operations and am bringing my knowledge of modern orthopaedic methods up to date a bit.



This is one part of the hospital - there are 3 blocks like this. You can see the long veranda wards.

There is a very pleasant atmosphere about the place – none of the bullying, carping attitude towards the junior nurses which I found hard at Farnham at first, although I got used to it. I haven't heard a harsh word since I got here! I think it is partly that they have a better class of nurse here (many are evacuated from St Thomas'), and also that the working hours are so much shorter that everyone is not eternally tired and ragged out. Also, there is no shortage of nurses, so there is no need to hound them on all the

time to get through the work. I am finding it quite a rest-cure, though I must admit I find it very dull from the nursing point of view. I go on duty at 8am instead of 7 most days, have 3 hours off instead of 2 and get off a little earlier in the evening.

I am in very comfortable billets just at the foot of the drive, with a nice large room and every comfort, and the hospital has lovely grounds with grass and trees, to sit in on one's off time.

It is pretty country – rather flat, being an extension of the Thames valley. At present it is lusciously green, and the trees and fruit blossom are lovely. It is ideal for bicycling and



I was billeted in the house at the end of the road

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practically everyone does. We are a mile and a half from a village and 3½ mile from the nearest town, Woking. Pyrford is nothing but a collection of houses, a few farms, a charming little Norman church and a wee post-office -store.

I am billeted with very kind and agreeable working people in one of the Council houses which are becoming an eyesore all over England – rather showy looking but very jerry-built. However, I am very comfortable.

Yesterday I bicycled over to Chobham to see Cousin Constance Lloyd and Marabel – they are only about 6 miles away and are very kind and friendly. Marabel is also nursing at a nearby hospital. She is a very capable girl with lots of character and is Commander of her VA detachment.

The Spring has been very late and cold. We are only just beginning to get warm weather and it is still very nippy when I get up in the morning. Of course, it is still pretty early, as the clocks have been put on 2 hours this summer as a special war measure, to save lighting. It is light up till 11pm now and lovely for bicycling after work.

I am in a ward consisting of an enormously long veranda housing 60 convalescent soldiers. They are a cheerful lot of ruffians, most of them up and about all day. There is one free Frenchman there and 2 Belgians, so I practise my French a little. Many wards are open-air and are, of course, lovely now but must be freezing in the winter.

We are watching Iraq and Syria anxiously at the moment – France seems likely to completely turn dog on us at any moment and I shouldn't be surprised if Turkey did too.

Hess's arrival in Scotland last week was a sensation and we hope before long to hear an explanation of his motives if it has been possible to discover them.

I haven't been to London since the last very damaging raid, but I believe they made an awful mess of parts of it. The Abbey had been so lucky up to date that one hoped its luck might hold.

Much love to you all,
Rachel

Aunt Rachel's Letters from England 1941

St Nicholas Hospital

June 17th, 1941

Dear Family,

Here it is the middle of June and this is the first really warm day we have had! I thought we were going to miss the summer altogether. It is a lovely evening. I got off at 5:30, bicycled along the towpath of the Wey River Canal, which is quite close, and am now sitting on the bank toasting in the sun and writing. It is 8:30 pm and as warm as can be, and people are swimming in the river and fishing and canoeing. A really good summer's day in England is hard to beat, but they are so few of them. The two hours extra summer time are very nice. It is light till midnight now. In fact, it is never really dark.



You can cycle for miles along this towpath and it is always cool and pretty.

I am still liking the hospital and am glad I moved. I sometimes get a bit restless with all the housework etc, but there is a lot that is interesting too.

I went up to London yesterday. Did a little shopping and got my tennis racquet and golf clubs out of Harrod's store. I don't know whether my hand will hold a racquet yet, but I'll try it out. There are several nice en-tout-cas courts here and a golf course nearby.

One has to shop cautiously now that clothes rationing has come in. There are 66 coupons allowed per year. A dress takes from 10 to 20, shoes 5, stockings 2, a handkerchief 1, a nightdress 7, an oz of knitting wool 2 etc. It really doesn't worry me at all. I have a good stock of clothes and don't want to buy anything except an occasional pair of stockings or gloves. I spend nearly all of my time in uniform so haven't much opportunity to wear out what I have got.

Since I wrote last there has been all the tragic and disappointing business of Crete. Mr Churchill in his last speech in parliament justified the attempt to hold it against such hopeless odds, but the losses have been very sad. However, I suppose we must expect that sort of thing, and more of it yet. Things seem to be going well in Syria.

I have been moved to another and much more interesting ward. The patients, all either soldiers from Dunkirk or air-raid casualties, are more ill and need more attention. The open-air wards are very nice just now.

They feed us wonderfully well here considering the restrictions. I think the hospitals are allowed a certain amount of extra and there is a dietitian on the staff who plans a reasonably well-balanced diet with what is obtainable. Shortages fluctuate with bombing and shipping losses, but we manage quite well on the whole.

I go to the pictures in Woking now and then, 'The Long Voyage Home' was the last one and was very good.

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I listened to a recorded broadcast from Australia about the war effort a few nights ago. It was impressive, particularly the increase of manufacture of war materials. One of the speakers was an engineer lecturing to air-force students on mathematics in his spare time. It might have been Howard, but it wasn't. It was all rather out of date as the first lot was sunk and this was repeated.

Helen is coming down here for the next weekend. I have managed to get her a room. She is usually free in the weekends, but accommodation is hard to get out of London as every inch is full. I am hoping for good weather so that we can row on the river in the evenings, which is really very delightful.

The air-raids have been very light here. A few planes come over but there have been few bombs. It is rather noisy as the outer ring of the London AA defences is just here and the guns are louder than anything, I have heard yet and the shrapnel rattles down through the trees in the garden. It doesn't worry us at all now as the hours of darkness when they can come over are so short. In the winter, the girls all wear tin helmets going to and from their billets.

I had dinner with the Roberts at Putney yesterday. They were cheerful and have weathered the blitzes well. They have all moved their beds downstairs into the sitting rooms and have sent all the furniture they set much value on to the basement of a friend's large house, but otherwise were carrying on much as usual. Cousin Harrie has always kept a good table, so restrictions must worry her, but I noticed she gave us a very good meal yesterday.

I hope you are all well and happy. Much love to everyone.
Rachel

Aunt Rachel's Letters from England 1941

St Nicholas' Hospital
Pyrford, Surrey
July 13th, 1941

Dear Family,

We have just had almost a month of unbroken heatwave – plunged into it suddenly from the depths of winter, and it is now breaking up with a series of thunderstorms. It really has been hot – round about 95 degrees on the wards and 110 on the asphalt outside where we wheel the beds. I must say I have enjoyed it, although on duty in a starched uniform is not where one would choose to be. We spend most of our spare time cooling off in the vicinity of the river, and everyone has a healthy-looking coat of tan.

I have been over several times to see Cousin Constance Lloyd at Chobham and she introduced me to a Mrs Bray, who has a charming home on the canal only a mile from the hospital, and I have been to see her 2 or 3 times.

Helen came down for a week-end last month and I borrowed a bicycle for her and we had a great time cruising around the country, swimming and picnicking, except one evening when I led her to a pretty pine wood near a swamp for our supper and we were eaten alive by mosquitoes, midges etc. They usually seem to be there in millions to spoil the pretty cool looking little dells and woods.

Germany's marching into Russia was a thunderbolt, and a serious turn of events unless the Soviet can hold them, which they seem to be doing now better than appeared likely at first. America's taking over Iceland is a helpful and encouraging event.

I have been playing tennis quite a bit in the evenings lately and have been delighted to find that my hand stands up to it quite well and I seem to be neither better nor worse than when I last played in Australia. I had doubted that I would ever play again. It is not very brilliant tennis – singles with another nurse, who is not very good, but it is good exercise.

I went to Farnham to see Susie last week, bicycling a good part of the way and taking the bike on the train when I got tired. Susie's rabbit farm was going ahead. Her 4 have increased to 50 and her first lot of babies are ready to eat, so she is doing a useful bit of production. It is quite a business keeping them in food, as the ration of bought food is very small, so it means growing vegetables for them and tramping the countryside gathering green plants that they like.

A fortnight ago I was suddenly moved on to the theatre which I found intensely interesting. It was rather nerve-racking at first, as the technique of the theatre has to be absolutely perfect and there is no room for any cog in the wheels to make the slightest error. Just as I was over the initial part and was thoroughly enjoying it, I was switched yesterday on to a new ward, so am now going through the settling down process again. Every ward is differently run, according to the Sister's ideas. What is important in one, is negligible in another, so moving about needs a lot of adaptability.

The dry weather, following a cool damp spring has been very good for the crops, which promise to be record ones, but it has been very bad for the vegetable gardens and peas, beans etc dried up almost before they ripened. Allotment holders tried to water their holdings with buckets and ARP stirrup-pumps, but it has been a job to keep things alive. However, it is raining now. It has been glorious year for roses and the delphiniums have been as lovely as ever but were over very quickly. Jean Blake, with whom I was friendly at Farnham has been over several times and spent the night with me. My billeteur kindly put up a stretcher in my room.

I hope you are all well, Love from, Rachel

Aunt Rachel's Letters from England 1941

St Nicholas' Hospital
Pyrford
August 14th, 1941

Dear Family,

I have been on night duty for several weeks. It is a rather weird experience – not quite so bad as I expected, but it takes a bit of adjustment of one's self. I manage to sleep quite soundly in the daytime but do grudge spending all the hours of sunlight in bed. Sometimes I try sleeping early or late and going out somewhere during the rest of the day, but it is an awful struggle to keep awake all night afterwards.

I went into Woking to the pictures yesterday – "Pimperal Smith" – very good.

Helen came down last Saturday afternoon. We went for a ride and had tea out and when I went on duty, she went to my billets and spent the night in my bed and the next morning I rode part of the way home with her. He tells me Andrew is in Canada with the Empire Air Scheme and may shortly be over here.

Tonight, we lose one of our 2 hours of extra summer time, so the blackout jumps back to 9:30pm tomorrow. It has been a good idea and has given people useful evenings after work.

They are just starting harvesting about here and a good yield seems likely. Fruit is just beginning to come in but is very dear and scanty. I fancied a peach yesterday but jibbed at the price 2/6 each and finally bought a 1/3 nectarine, which was delicious. I believe they are fixing the price of plums when they come in next week, but as soon as a price is fixed the foodstuff in question disappears from the market, as there are always a certain number of people willing to pay the high prices secretly. The government is trying to deal with this "black market", but it is hard to catch them at it.

Helen brought down a S.M. Herald and I enjoyed all the familiar advertisements etc – and recipes saying "Take 2 onions, 3 eggs, ¼ of grated cheese and other fantastic things!

In it I noted that you are still short of water on the catchment area in spite of the state-wide rain. I hope you have had enough by now, as it would be a bad lookout for the summer.

I also noticed that Mrs Sheppard had died.

Relations between the Pacific powers are very strained at present and the atmosphere must be pretty tense in Australia. I scan the papers anxiously for any bits of news, but they don't have very much. The Times is the only one that reports Australian affairs at all fully and that costs 3d now and is very hard to get at all. Owing to the paper shortage there are limited numbers of papers printed and if you are not a permanent and old established resident you don't have much chance.

Russia seems to be holding on wonderfully. May she continue to do so!

Some weeks ago, I went to Goring, a pretty little town on the Thames near Reading to spend the day with Dorothy Gurner (Daisy F-C's cousin). We had a lovely day and went for a swim in Thames from the private garden of some friends of hers.

Cousin Jean Fowler has come to live in Farnham. It was a pity she wasn't there when I was at the hospital. Her sister has a house there, and when Cos J. sold Gastard, she rented this place.

I went some weeks ago to spend a night with Ailsa Bragg (Cutler). She has a charming home on a farm in a perfectly lovely part of Sussex. She seems very happy and takes a great interest in the work of the place.

Aunt Rachel's Letters from England 1941

Your last letters say you haven't heard from me for 6 weeks, so I don't know if a letter has gone astray. I am not very good, but I don't think I have ever left writing more than a month. I find letters take quite indefinite times, up to 3 to 4 months, but I have been lucky that I seem to have received everything so far as I can tell. Often an early letter arrives weeks later than one written a month later.

We have had a few weeks of rather dreary wet weather, so I hope there is a good dry spell waiting for September when I get my holiday.

Much love to you all

Rachel

There has been very little enemy action overhead lately. Only on one night since I have come on Night duty have the sirens gone. We hear planes overhead quite often – they are droning away at the moment – but whereas last year they were inevitably German, now they are more often our own night-fighters or bombers setting out or returning.

Aunt Rachel's Letters from England 1941

St Nicholas' Hospital
Pyrford, Surrey
Aug 22nd, 1941

Dear Family

My idea of getting lots of letters written during the long nights fell rather flat as I find one feels so terribly dull and sleepy in the early hours of the morning that the old brain just won't function. Even if one gets adequate sleep in the daytime, which is unusual, one still suffers from an overpowering drowsiness at night. I daresay in a very busy ward where there was no time to sit down it would be different, but this ward, being mostly convalescent soldiers is chiefly busy in the mornings and evenings. Night-duty has its compensations, though, one is free from all the routine of dusting and cleaning and one has more to do with the patients themselves.

I am thinking of leaving here shortly. I have been quite happy here and have seen a lot of interesting work, but I think, but I think it has served its time and I don't want to settle here for the winter. I believe the cold is unspeakable in the open-air wards, and the situation is very low and damp. It has been ideal for the summer.

I am due for 3 weeks holiday in September, so don't intend to come back afterwards unless I can't find anything else to do. I have given notice, but the Matron will have me back if I want. I shall have a good look round and might even consider going home if things seem slack, though that is not very likely.

I have applied for a massage job at a military hospital in Harrogate through the Massage Association, which may lead to something, and have also answered several other adverts in the papers which are not likely to.

I am thinking of going to the north of England and perhaps Scotland for my holiday. In fact, I have taken a room at a hotel in Northumberland kept by some friends of Jessie Wishart, but now the idea of possibly going to Harrogate to work makes me uncertain if I want to go there beforehand. I may change my plans.

I have just had 3 nights off duty – one gets that once a month. I went up to London, saw Helen and various other people, went to some theatres – “Blythe Spirit” was the best of them, did some shopping, and thoroughly enjoyed myself.

Sept 14th Exmouth, Devon

Things have moved rapidly for me in the last couple of weeks. The Harrogate job fell through, but to my surprise, I got an acceptance to one of my other applications and have been appointed to the massage staff of the Royal Victoria Infirmary in Newcastle-on-Tyne. Not much of a town to go to, but I hear it is a good hospital and I am very pleased about it. I start there on Oct 1st.

I therefore cancelled my holiday arrangements in the North as I shall see lots of that part of the country in the future, and I am enjoying myself in the South and in London.

I left St Nicholas' on Sept 2nd, stayed on in my billets for a few days to pack up etc, went down to Susie's for a few days, spending a night at Ailsa's on the way, and now I am having a very pleasant week at a hotel at Exmouth. I came here because the old cousins from Bath, Cha and Jessie, have left their house and are living here and I thought I'd like to see them. It is a very comfortable hotel – I have a lovely room looking over the sea and am wallowing in luxury – staying in bed late in the morning etc and eating marvellous meals – I don't know how they manage them on the rations. It is a change after hospital food, good though that was for these times.

Aunt Rachel's Letters from England 1941

September is providing beautiful sunshine – quite a belated summer and I am doing a lot of sunbaking on the beach. I've had a few swims, but the water is icy.

Yesterday I took the ferry across the estuary to Dawlish to see the old Misses Cooke. They are unchanging and still keep an enormous correspondence with a lot of Sydney people, so were able to give me lots of Hunters Hill news.

England is very peaceful at present and one forgets it was ever anything else. Stray planes wander over now and then but nothing much.

Russia still holds out magnificently and gives us a breather, of which I hope the powers that be are taking advantage. The essential thing seems to be to produce arms and more arms.

This is a pretty little sea-side resort about 10 miles from Exeter at the mouth of the Exe. The whole length of the beach is barricaded with barbed wire but there are a couple of small sections on which the public is allowed to go. The sandhills behind the beach bristle with guns, but everything is very quiet.

I enclose a few postcards of Pyrford (*inserted in previous letters*) – if they make this overweight, I'll send them separately. I was sorry to leave there in many ways, it was a nice hospital and I enjoyed being in the country. Still, I used to get pretty fed up with nursing.

Much love to you all,
Rachel

I should very much like a few pictures of Australia, of the sort one gets in the Xmas numbers of pictorial annuals – "Home, Australasian" or something of that sort. People so often ask me questions, and anyway I'd like to have them for myself.

Aunt Rachel's Letters from England 1941

Royal Victoria Infirmary
Newcastle – on - Tyne
Oct 5th, 1941

Dear Family,

Here I am settled in my new job. Settled for about a year I suppose unless anything drastic changes my plans. I am very pleased with everything. It is grand to be working in my own field again, and it seems as if it would be a very good experience. I have struck, just by luck, a first-class hospital, one of the best in the north I should think. It is a medical training hospital, so the standard of work is high. It has about 650 beds.

It is also a massage training school, so a great variety of work is done in the Massage Department for the benefit of the students.

It is an old hospital but has a lot of new and up to date buildings attached to it. The orthopaedic department is one of them and has been built for the purpose and beautifully equipped. It is divided into 7 different sections with a different type of work done in each. A qualified masseuse is in charge of each room and is responsible for the work of the students working there. My room is the "Bath Room" which contains every imaginable sort of electric bath and a warmed swimming pool. To exercise one's patients in that one dons waders and enters the pool up to the waist.

I do not live in but am lodging in a small private hotel about a mile away in a quiet suburban street. It is just a nice walk there, but a trolley bus runs almost from door to door if required. I have settled down in quite a nice attic room. It is a bit dingy, but I am going to brighten it up with some fresh cretonnes, and as it has a gas fire, gas ring and reading light, I should be quite comfortable for the winter. The food is good, and they keep a good fire in the sitting room if I don't want to be in my own room.

I feel quite guilty about food at present. The hospital gives us a good midday dinner without requiring any coupons and I get another dinner at night, so it means I often have meat 3 times a day when people outside often only get it 3 times a week. The food position is quite good at present though. Rations have been increased this week and I don't think anyone is suffering any hardship. Eggs, one a fortnight, are the most tiresome shortage just now. It says a lot for the state of the Battle of the Atlantic that shipments are coming through so well and that food can be actually increased at this time. One feels almost ashamed when one thinks of conditions in France, Greece etc.

Newcastle, I like better than I expected. It is rather a homely sort of town, and the people have a friendly air though they speak a strange language! I find it very hard to understand them but suppose I'll get used to it and will probably catch it myself. The town is very dirty and most of the buildings are of an ugly style, but it has wide streets and some nice open spaces. My hospital is in the middle of town but on a hill a little apart from the crowded buildings and surrounded by a park and university buildings.

I had not realised how separate the North is from the South, where everything centres around London. Here they don't bother about it and lots of people have never been there.

My holiday simply flew. I raced about rather too much to find it really restful, but I enjoyed it and got through a lot of business, dentists etc. I took a room in London when I returned from Exmouth, dumped my luggage there, and, keeping it as a centre, went away for odd days – 2 to Cousin Jean in Farnham, 2 to the Burrows in Bucks etc. The best theatre I saw was "No Time for Comedy", a clever play by an American writer with a very good cast, Diana Wynard among them. I went to "Forty Thousand Horsemen" one day and enjoyed it, though it had a very amateurish air among the more

Aunt Rachel's Letters from England 1941

sophisticated and finished pictures one usually sees. It was exciting though and I liked hearing the Australian voices again. It was well received by the audience who clapped and cheered. I saw Helen quite a lot. She is very busy at her hospital and very happy there, getting very good experience.

I have been watching the political situation out there with interest. Mr Curtin has just taken over. I don't suppose the change will make any vast difference, but I should think it will probably mean an election before long as his position won't be any more stable than Mr Fadden's.

The chief idea at the moment is support for Russia – tanks, planes and more and more arms. The production is speeding up well both here and in America, but the difficulty is to get them there, and to get them there in time.

If this should happen to arrive at Xmas time, a Happy Xmas to you all, and lots of luck in 1942.

Much love,
Rachel

Aunt Rachel's Letters from England 1941

Newcastle-on-Tyne

Nov 6th, 1941

Dear Family,

On Nov 3rd I got news about Lorraine and Howard's daughter and am very pleased and excited.

I think I wrote to you last just after I arrived in Newcastle. I feel quite settled here now and am very happy in my work.

Work has settled down into a routine – busy but interesting. For the first fortnight it was terribly hectic, and I felt dazed, but I have the hang of it now. We are left very free in charge of our own sections of the department, which is very nice, but is difficult at first. I found it particularly so as much of the work was new to me and I found the students an awful nuisance. I still do – they come in fresh batches every fortnight to do in practice the electricity they have learned in theory. There is no time to show them just how you like things done or supervise them properly, but you are responsible for all the stupid things they do, and just when they are really useful, they pass on. However, that is only a detail. The regular staff of 10 are a particularly nice lot – you couldn't find nicer. Unless very busy we get one and a half hours at lunchtime, so one can slip out and do a little shopping then, and we are usually away by 5. One of the staff, a Miss Welton (who has a brother living at Bay View in Sydney) took me one Sunday to her little weekend shack (if you can call a solid little one-roomed hut with walls 2 feet thick, a shack). It was about 20 miles away in the country and we had a lovely carefree day, having al fresco meals by a big fire and going for walks.

It is getting pretty cold now, but the air is very fresh and exhilarating and makes you feel very fit. You can walk for miles. The real winter hasn't started yet, but I don't think I shall mind it.

I got a fright a few days ago on finding that all my woolly underclothes had disappeared, and me with scarcely any coupons left for the next 3 months! However, it was traced to one of the little maids, a girl of 15, and I have got most of them back, somewhat shrunken and spoiled but still warm. It was a great relief. I am fairly careful, but it is impossible to lock up everything when you go off early in the morning, and once I have gone, they know the coast is clear till evening. I have considered moving my lodgings but doubt if I can find such good value elsewhere, so shall probably stay.

There are only a few boarders – quite a nice lot on the whole. An elderly Mr Reynard who has been here for many years and is very well read and quite interesting; an old Miss Curtin, a retired schoolteacher and native of Newcastle, whose whole horizon is bounded by a 20 mile radius around the town; a Major and Mrs Scott-Moncrief, his job is to do with making smoke-screens over the district; and a Sheila Kennedy, a motor transport corps driver of about 18, quite a nice kid but she will invade my room every night around 10 and sit by my fire talking about her love affairs until after midnight. I get a bit bored with it as I want to write letters, read or sleep at that time. I pay 2 guineas a week and have a gas fire (shilling in the slot) so I don't think I do too badly.

Last week I went to stay with a nephew of Cousin Jean Fowler and his wife (Sir Edward and Lady Pease) at Guisborough in Yorkshire. It is in a pretty part of the country not far from Middlesbrough, a busy industrial town. They have a very jolly little flat. The owner of the big house of the district (Lord Guisborough) is evidently a bit impoverished and has turned his stables into flats, so the Peases have a combination of a compact little home with all mod cons, set in the middle of the lovely park-like grounds of a mansion. The Mansion has mostly been taken over by the military, and Lord G. and his family seemed to be living in about 2 rooms of it. I went to tea there. The entrance hall was like a

Aunt Rachel's Letters from England 1941

museum with heads of rhinoceros and other African animals evidently shot by some members of the family.

Another week I went up north to a little place called Wark about 30 miles away. Rather wild moorland country and very attractive. The Northern Country is very different from the soft, luscious South, all thick with trees. It is more open and windswept and there are grey stone walls instead of hedges. The houses are all grey stone. The farms are compact little settlements with house, stables, pigsties, haystacks and everything enclosed within a stone wall. They look very snug; ready to withstand a severe winter or raiders from Scotland, which they had to do a few hundred years ago. I believe this part of the country is teeming with history, which I intend to read up sometime.

At Wark I stayed at a little hotel kept by 2 friends of Jessie Wishart. (The Wisharts were in Newcastle while the "Sydney" was being built). It is a nice little private pub. With about 15 boarders and will be a nice place to go when I want a change. I get a bus after lunch on Saturday but have to come back on Sunday afternoon as I can't get back in time on Monday.

Things have been quiet here lately. A few stray raiders over now and then, but nothing much.

Love to you all,

Rachel

Aunt Rachel's Letters from England 1941

Newcastle-on Tyne

Dec 7th, 1941

Dear Family,

The news has just come through on the wireless of Japan's attacking Hawaii and Manila, which sounds pretty ominous. I had hope Japan was only bluffing. By tomorrow I suppose America will be in it up to the neck. It is all so horribly close to Australia that I feel very uneasy. By all accounts, though, the government seems to have been well awake to the danger lately, and I suppose preparations are well in hand. The trouble is to know what to prepare against. Australia is such a big place to defend.

Before long we may be sitting back here, feeling a long way from the war and wishing there was something we could do, as you have often felt out there! I shall feel like taking the first plane home if things start out there!

All goes well with us here. Winter is beginning, but so far has not been at all severe – more damp than cold, in fact some days lately have been positively hot and muggy. Tonight, however feels like snow.

Work goes on as usual, busy but quite pleasant. We have just heard that we only get Xmas day off, so I shall not be making any exciting plans. It is not worth going away. The government does everything possible to discourage travelling this year, as the drain on the transport system becomes very great, with half the population away from their homes and wanting to get home for Xmas. There are not only no extra trains, but the services are curtailed, and no guarantee given that any train will run as advertised.

It was sad news this week about the loss of the 'Sydney', she has had a fine career, but it is tragic to have lost her, and worse still, her personnel. I felt nervous about Rupert, too, on hearing of the loss of the Parramatta, knowing that he was doing convoy work, though, of course, I don't know what he is in.

I have moved my lodgings a couple of blocks down the street. I told you in my last letter that I had all my winter woollies stolen. Well, finally all 3 maids were found to be involved in it, and in the resultant dust-up (during which I got most of my things back) they all decided to leave.

Advertisements for new ones produced no results, so the hotel was closed at a few days' notice. It was rather hard on the old people who had been there for years, but all eventually found digs. Mine is much more homely and simple, but I really like it better. I have a nice large room with a gas fire, and the food is excellent – nice home-cooking on a most generous scale. There are 7 of us here – not so much my own kind as at the other place, but I like them all – A dour old Scotsman, and 2 younger men in business, I don't know of what kind – one of them seems rather literary and artistic; one very vivacious and amusing Scotch woman who is the fitter in a dress shop and another woman who is the manageress of a photography business; the last one is an art student, a girl of 20.

The landlady, Miss Halliday, is a kindly, energetic woman (with a very bad temper, I hear, but no one seems to take any notice of it and they stay here for years). She makes you feel comfortable and at home and is managing all the work by herself as maids are unobtainable (they are all called up to the services and working in munitions – very rightly). We all give Miss Halliday an occasional hand, and, as a compensation, it is possible, if you come in late from a show, to have your dinner kept in the oven and eat it by the kitchen fire with no bother to anyone, or to make yourself a cup of tea whenever you like.

Aunt Rachel's Letters from England 1941

We have had some very good shows here lately. It is one of the great advantages of Newcastle that everything seems to come here for a week. Since the war, the best companies come too, as the theatre world in London is not as live as usual. We have just had a very excellent ballet, and the seats range from 1/- to 6/- for the very best, it is very satisfactory altogether. I generally go to something every week. There have been some good pictures lately too. "49th Parallel" was grand.

We each get a Saturday morning off every 2 to 3 months, making a long weekend and I had mine a couple of weeks ago and went to Edinburgh. It was delightful, I had forgotten what a lovely city it was! It looked beautiful through a light November mist, tinted by a weak red sun. The castle looked magnificent towering over the town. It is a fascinating town – gives me the same feeling of enchantment that Paris does. It was full of soldiers on leave and was very gay, I talked to both Australian and Canadian airmen who had been in England for a month and were having 10 days leave and were very thrilled. There were uniforms of all nationalities there. They have particularly taken the Poles under their wing and there are so many they have actually started a university for them.

Here in Newcastle there are masses of Norwegians. There is a hostel for them just opposite. In Edinburgh I met the Meares – Molly and Norah, the former, a Dr, is studying for her FRCS and the latter is an officer in the WRENS. I spent a day with her at their headquarters in Dunfermline, near Edinburgh and enjoyed it very much. They are a fine force.

On Saturday I went to see an elderly cousin, a Mrs T. Hodgkin, who lives a few miles out of Newcastle. (Whatever part of England one goes to; one is liable to get a letter from a stranger starting "Dear Cousin"). She is a funny old thing, living alone in a house just crammed with curiosities and objects of art – mostly statues from Italy and Greece – Some are very beautiful and others not so good. She seemed rather a managing old lady and may be a bit of a nuisance but was very kind. I like seeing different homes, and it was in very pretty country.

Dec 9th Things have moved apace the last few days, and I watch with bated breath, terrified to hear of an attack on Darwin. But I think the Japs will have to get past Singapore first and I hope that will be too difficult for them. Fancy poor little Nauru getting it again! I'm afraid they will try to capture it; it is so valuable. The gov seems to be tackling the situation energetically in Aust, I notice women are being called up and everything put on a war time footing. It will be a jolt for those who have shut their eyes to the danger threatening.

May you all be kept safe
Much love
Rachel