

Humsbough, Northumberland

Jan 1st, 1945

Dear Family,

A Happy New Year to you all! I thought of you as we drank healths last night. (Incidentally, I also suddenly remembered that I had forgotten to send you a Xmas cable this year – I don't know why – probably because the airletters are so quick now that one doesn't feel so cut off and cables are not so important.)

Well, I haven't any striking news for you over the Xmas season, as I have followed exactly the programme of the last 2 years – Dinner with the Hills on night, 2 days (one of them Xmas Day) with Cousin Catherine Hodgkin at Stocksfield, and New Year weekend with Vera Welton at their cottage in the village of Humsbough. It has not been extra cold this year, just hard frosts, and it is grand to be in the country. It is beautiful at all times of the year, and of course is ideal for walking just now. I hear there is a lot of hunting about here and I hoped I might meet a hunt in action on one of my walks but haven't been lucky so far.

I expect to finish at Hexham next week, and it looks as if I would have a week or so with nothing to do, which I shall quite enjoy, but can't afford to do for very long. Then I am going to London to Susie for about a week, and if no suitable work has turned up in this district will look for something there. I may be going to a chest hospital in Shotley Bridge Durham for 6 weeks in Feb but haven't heard for certain yet.

I am very well and seem to keep free of colds etc.

I went to a meeting in Newcastle lately held by Lord Vansittart to air his views on Winning the Peace. His ideas seemed to be very sound and constructive. The key point was that Germany must be made and kept militarily impotent. He said, "I am not one of the people who says that the only good German is a dead German, but I do say that the only safe German is a powerless one." I was very impressed with him and feel he is on the right track in getting something concrete started before people drop into inertia on the subject when the struggle is over, and his ideas seem more likely to work than most I have heard put forward. I shall enclose, or send under separate cover, some of his pamphlets to see what you think of it.

Jan 8th. It has been cold the last few days, sleety, and the streets frozen and very slippery. The old women go about with men's socks pulled on over their shoes to keep them from slipping.

I had lunch at a British Restaurant today, an excellent meal for 1/-. They are to be found in every town in England and are well patronised. They were originally started during the 1940 blitz to feed people whose cooking arrangements had gone, and they seem to fill a need for business people and to save home cooking for maid-less houses, and, of course, they help out the meat ration. They are run on a rough and ready help-yourself style and vary a lot as to cleanliness according to the management.

The Hexham patients who had not gone home on leave had quite a good Xmas season. A lot of trouble was taken to amuse them, and entertainments of some sort were arranged for 12 consecutive nights. I only went to one, a concert contributed by patients and nursing staff, which was very good. Afterwards we camped for the night in our gym to save going home. In the middle of the night I was awakened by a terrific rushing wind and a great banging of doors and windows, and I was surprised to hear in the morning that an earthquake had passed across England. I never expected one here.

Aunt Rachel's Letters 1945

Jan 12th

It has been snowing hard for the last 3 days. Yesterday hearing that a shipment of oranges had reached the NE and was being distributed in the shops, I sallied forth to collect my lb, thinking that I would be among a hardy few. But no, the queues outside each fruit-shop stretched down the street, ankle deep in snow. However, we got them alright and a grapefruit too, so it was worth it.

It is teeming today, and everything is very wet and slushy. The snow on the roofs fascinates me. It starts to slither down the slope, pauses at the edge and crinkles up like an enormous piece of flannel, and then, with a rushing roar, slushes down below. I've never had it land on me but can't imagine anything more unpleasant.

Well, I want to write individual notes to some of you, so will stop this rambling on.

I have had nearly a week at home and have enjoyed getting odd jobs of sewing etc done. Next week I expect to go to London and start work again on Feb 1st.

Love to you all,
Rachel

Newcastle-on-Tyne

Feb 10th, 1945

Dear Family,

I hope you can bear the paper (*bright pink*)! It was all I could get in a light weight.

I have just returned from London, where I spent 10 pleasant days – they would have been pleasanter had they not been so cold, but it seems to have been much colder up here, by all accounts. It was an unusual spell of freezing for London, the temperature remained well below zero for day after day, and the snow stayed dry and powdery. The trees looked lovely with every bare twig glistening with ice, particularly in the moonlight at night. It was rather hard to keep warm in the flat, as the gas pressure was infinitesimal and the electricity cut off periodically because of the exceptional load, and there was no fire. I don't think the fuel control people managed very well, as it was the first really cold spell we have had for three years and they might have expected and prepared for something of the sort, but there's no doubt it was exceptional and transport was held up all over the country making it impossible to get coal away from the mines or to distribute it. Trains were 12 hours or more late and it was pitiful to see the horses drawing carts in the London streets trying to keep their footing. We kept warm by means of plenty of clothes. I stayed with Susie, and Rosemary was there for some of the time, on holiday from her domestic science school. I was pleased to see her, after a gap of several years. She is a pretty girl of 17 and a very nice one. Unfortunately, she is very shy, but she will probably grow out of it, and anyway, it is a pleasant change these days. Susie still does munition work, but now brings it home to do as she found it difficult to be away at the factory all day with her family to look after. She makes some part of a delicate instrument, very fine work, needing great precision. She spends about 6 hours a day at it and likes doing it much better than working in the factory.

We used to hear 3 or 4 rockets per day, but none of them close enough to worry us, There is no warning of them at all – just the bang, and then, curiously enough, the sound of its coming as it travels faster than sound – a loud thundery rumble, which gradually dies away like a train in the distance. Anything they hit is unlucky, and the blast shatters windows and brings down ceilings for miles around, but they don't play havoc with peoples' nerves as the flying-bombs did. I never heard one of those, but they say the tension was awful after you heard the engine stop, waiting anything from a few seconds to five minutes for the bang, and knowing it couldn't be very far off. The main part of London looks much as usual, but the suburbs look pretty shabby and shattered – miles of windowless houses with here and there a heap of rubble. Restaurants and theatres were as full as ever, the latter very expensive. The shops seemed fairly well stocked. I wasn't doing much shopping myself, but I did notice things that have been unobtainable for years were creeping back again. I bought myself a cheap second-hand camera; nothing like as good as the old one I lost, but I hated being without it and it will be better than none.

I spent a day with the Roberts at Putney. They were rather pathetic as both Cos. Wallis and Cos. Harrie are very frail now, and he was ill with bronchitis and very pessimistic about himself. However, the doctor is not unduly anxious about him, and he is looked after most tenderly by his family, so I expect he will improve when the weather warms up again. They had a very narrow escape a few months ago, as a V2 landed on a house about 6 from them, demolishing it, and the church almost next door to them was badly damaged. The ceiling of Gwen's room came down on her bed, but she was under the Morrison shelter (an indoor steel shelter which people use as a dining-room table), and the old people, who had stayed in their beds, were untouched.

Aunt Rachel's Letters 1945

I am back working at Hexham again for a fortnight, feeling pleased that I was not there during January, when the snow was so deep and the trains running late. Now it is not bad as it is light until 6.30.

Next week I shall be starting work at the chest hospital at Shotley Bridge for a few months.

Love to you all,
Rachel.

Aunt Rachel's Letters 1945

Newcastle

March 12th, 1945

Dear Family,

I have been working at Shotley Bridge Emergency Hospital for 3 weeks and like it. It is a large scattered lot of buildings housing several different units which are all complete in themselves – a chest surgery block. A psychiatry block etc. I am only concerned with the chest surgery part. It is new work for me, and interesting, though it would be monotonous for a permanency. I am staying 2 months while the staff have their holidays in turn. Most of our patients are casualties with chest wounds, but there are also a good many civilians having operations for various conditions. For instance, in suitable cases of TB they cause the chest wall on the affected side to fall in by cutting away 6 or 8 ribs and that collapses the bad lung and checks the disease. Other patients have had a diseased lung or part of a lung removed. It is a comparatively recent branch of surgery and seems to be showing good results. Our job consists largely of breathing exercises, dealing with stiff arms, and later taking the patients in progressively energetic classes. Taking classes is a nightmare to me, but I can't avoid it and I struggle through somehow.

Shotley Bridge is a little village in County Durham. I go by bus, a journey of about an hour through pretty country. It stands very high and is a bitterly cold spot, so I glad I wasn't there in the cold weather. There is a nice touch of spring in the air now, and the trees are beginning to burst.

I went to an excellent lecture on 'Australia and the fighting in the Pacific' a few nights ago, given by a Captain Beare, a sheep farmer from S.A. There were some good scenic films, and his talk was a simple soldier's account of the fighting – a personal story, and a general survey. One problem he mentioned was that the Japs, with their lines of communication cut, have settled down quite happily to live on the country in the islands where they have established themselves and been told to stay. As they never surrender, he considered they would have to be dug out and killed one by one and would be a menace for a long time.

Last weekend was a busy one as the N.E. branch of the massage society held its annual congress here. We had lectures all Saturday and Sunday and quite a lot of people came from Glasgow, Leeds etc, and I think it went off well.

The war news continues to be breath-taking, and this time it really seems like the end. The slaughter of civilians going on in Germany is a sickening thought, but the job must be done thoroughly this time and may it be over quickly.

We have a lot of German prisoners among our patients. They seem surprisingly philosophical and give us no trouble.

Much love,
Rachel.

Newcastle

April 30th, 1945

Dear Family,

The War is rapidly drawing to a dramatic conclusion in Europe. Things are happening so quickly one is left breathless, and events which would have caused delirious excitement a year ago. Such as the death of Hitler and Mussolini, are taken comparatively calmly now as part and parcel of the whole debacle. The end is coming more quickly than we could have anticipated, and with less expense of lives on our side. The whole thing has been a marvel of strategy and combined effort. It is a terrible thing to see a great nation in its death throes, but thank God it is not our nation, as it very easily might have been.

I wonder if we shall ever know the truth about Hitler's death? Possibly not, considering all the double-crossing that went on among his associates.

We have all been deeply shocked by the pictures of the atrocities in the concentration camps of Belsen etc. They have been given wide publicity in all the cinemas here, as, I expect they have with you too. I think rightly as one's imagination cannot picture such conditions from mere words.

We are waiting daily for the VE day announcement and there is a feeling of tension and suppressed excitement, but I think it will all pass off very quietly as the job is not nearly over yet. I hope Germany's collapse will make the Japs shake in their shoes!

After the announcement everything will close down for the rest of the day, and the next day will be a holiday. I don't know quite how it will apply to hospital staff, but our department will probably only keep on a skeleton staff.

Now a little news about my doings, past, present and future. I finished at Shotley Bridge Chest Hospital in April, and quite miss the pretty run through the country every day. We had a glorious early spring, most unusual for this Northern country where there is usually a cold wind – weeks of still weather with bright sunshine such as you often wait for in vain all the summer. The trees and flowers just burst out. However, it was too good to last and last week we came back to snow and rain and cold winds, and I am afraid the prospects for the fruit crop are poor as a consequence.

I went to Stocksfield for Easter, and had a pleasant rest, and found Cousin Catherine fairly well.

'Western Approaches' is a good picture, if it comes your way; about convoys crossing the Atlantic in difficult days.

While at Shotley Bridge I had several little expeditions up into the hilly moorland and beyond. I found there was a Youth Hostel there, and a bus going up in the evening to a most charming little village called Blanchland a few miles beyond. So, with a friend, I took the bus after work to Blanchland, where we had a good dinner and afterwards walked for 5 miles to Edmundbyers (where the Y.H. is). It is light till pretty much 11pm now. We slept there, and got up very early, and walked the 6 miles to Shotley Bridge and started work at 9. It was a nice change.

Now I have started work for a month at a Ministry of Pensions hospital called Dunstan Hill. They have a lot of men there from the last war, and, of course, hundreds from this. They chiefly specialise in amputation cases and nerve injuries. The work is interesting, and it has one excellent point that it is close to Newcastle, and I am often home before 5, and can get to the shops before they close.

Here are, roughly, my plans for the summer.

June – a month at a hospital in Sunderland, a place on the coast a little south of Newcastle. A dull town, I believe, but the job sounds quite good.

Then I propose to give up my room in Newcastle, store my belongings, and move about to different parts of the country for a few months. I have had quite a number of relieving jobs to choose from, and I hope the ones I have selected will prove alright. Early in July I go to Loughborough in Leics. For 2 weeks, and then on to Ipswich in Suffolk for 3 weeks. (I haven't been in that flat part in the East of England before, and I believe it has its charms.

Then, for the latter half of August to Dartmouth in S. Devon (not finally clinched yet), and for September to a place called Darwen near the west coast of Lancashire, (a dreary industrial town, I am told, but that really doesn't matter.) You will notice I am working my way up to the North again, and if I don't get a passage before the winter, I shall look for work here again, as I'd rather be in a place I know for the cold weather. In September I shall enquire again about the shipping position – or before that if it seems that things are moving more quickly.

I have just heard that Marjorie Mann (Young) and her husband expect to leave about September as he has got a job in a country parish about 200 miles north of Perth. She is very delighted as Mr Young has been ill and she is eager to see her family again.

All air-raid precautions have now ceased here, the black-out is lifted, and you may blow whistles and ring bells if you so desire! Flags deck all the shop windows, and every child carries one. It is all a very happy state of affairs, and it is hard to realise that the Dutch are starving only a few miles away. I hope their troubles have been considerably relieved by the recent "air-bombardments" of food. The Danish merchant seaman whose wife lives in the next room to me is most excited and she complains she can't drag him away from the wireless.

Love from,
Rachel

Stocksfield-on-Tyne

June 3rd, 1945

Dear Family,

It is not very long since I wrote to you all, but I seem to have done quite a lot in the last few weeks, so shall record my doings while they are fresh in my mind.

Whitsuntide is always a holiday weekend over here, and usually can count on better weather than Easter. I spent the weekend with the Weltons at Humsbough on the North Tyne.

I felt I should see something of the Roman wall, and the ruined forts connecting with it before leaving Northumberland, so I took my bicycle in the train to Haltwistle, between Hexham and Carlisle, and then rode in an easterly direction along the old Roman road, which follows the line of the Wall. Unfortunately I struck a strong easterly wind and had to battle every inch of the way, so was rather tired when I arrived at Humsbough, but it was well worth doing.

The Wall has been destroyed most of the way, leaving nothing but an occasional trace, but here and there you find a few miles intact. It is only about 7 feet high by 4ft wide so was not so much an actual defence as a front line. Every mile there was a 'milecastle', a sort of glorified stone sentry-box for half a dozen men, and at greater intervals there were large forts where large numbers of troops were permanently housed. I had a good look at one, 'Borcovicus' which covers a few acres. The foundations of the buildings are still there, sticking up a couple of feet above the long grass, and the layout of the place can be plainly seen. Viewed from a distance it looks like an aerial map and you get a good idea of the way the Roman garrison lived. The raids, of course, came from the North, as Scotland was never occupied by the Romans. It is rolling country and in building the wall they made use of a natural wave-like formation of the country, rising gently from the South, and then dropping down a sudden cliff. The Wall follows the top of the cliff. It struck me that it was a pretty good feat of surveying to plan a road straight across the narrowest part of England through what must have in those days, been thick forest.

Then, last weekend I went to have a look at Holy Island, another historic part of N'land, where Christianity started in the north of England. A pagan king of Northumberland married a Christian princess from Kent who tried to convert him. As he hadn't been having much luck in his wars lately, he thought he might as well try a different deity, so allowed a missionary monk to come and set up a monastery on Holy Island. The ruins of it are still there. There is also a 15th century castle on the island which has been cleverly restored and is lived in. It was bought by the owner of 'Country Life' magazine who was something of a connoisseur of furniture and has bought suitable mediaeval furniture for it, so it is very complete and charming. Some of the huge four-poster beds have a large box built in at the foot in which the householder kept his gun, and cupboards built in at the head in which valuables were kept. It must be pretty bleak and cold these days of fuel shortage, and I don't think the family spend much time there. On the death of the present owner it is left to the nation. For the rest, the island consists of sand-dunes, grass, and a little fishing village, all very primitive. There are no trees and it is very windswept, but I understand it is very sunny in the summer, as summers go in the North. To get there you have to cross 4 miles of sand which is just covered with water at low tide, and too deep to cross at high, so you have to pick your time. The taxis which ply for hire across from the mainland only last 6 months at the job so you can imagine the awful old rattletraps that they buy for it. It is impossible to keep the water, salt and sand out of them, so they don't bother to maintain them more than is necessary to keep them going, and at the end of their lives they are just pushed over a cliff. Our driver said he had his name down for an amphibious D.U.C.K when they are released from the army. The tide comes in very quickly and people are sometimes caught by it, so at intervals there are platforms built up on stilts. At the beginning of the

War 10,000 stakes were driven into the sand flat, and hundreds of derelict cars were strewn about to hamper enemy aircraft landing. They are still there, partly submerged, and very untidy looking.

My plans are all arranged for the summer. I finish up here at the end of June, pack up my belongings and store them and set off on 4 holiday jobs taking me to Loughborough, Ipswich, Dartmouth and Lancashire, and lasting until the middle of October. By that time, I should certainly know something definite about my passage home, and from what I hear of other people I should get away before the end of the year. I have applied for my exit permit and am awaiting a reply.

The election is the chief preoccupation here at present, and as usual, each speech as you hear it sounds reasonable. But I can see nothing in them to shake my faith in Mr Churchill as a peacebuilder as well as a war-wager. There is room for much social reform, but even there the Conservative promises sound more practical and probable than those of the other parties. It seems a pity the Coalition couldn't have held together until the end of the Japanese war, but as the members were starting to pull in different directions and become party-minded it is best to have a show-down straight away.

I am now working at a hospital at Sunderland for a month. There is nothing special about it, but the work is light and the pay good and it fills in June nicely and leaves me a fair amount of spare time which I need just now, as I am starting to sort and pack my belongings, and say a temporary farewell to the people here, though I expect to come back for a short time at least before sailing. Sunderland is a busy industrial and ship-building town at the mouth of the Wear. It is only about half an hour south of Newcastle by train and is a dull and dingy place.

Love to you all,
Rachel

Loughborough

July 18th, 1945

Dear Family,

I don't fancy I'm going to have much time for writing during the next few months, as this constant changing of occupation keeps one on the go, but I'll try to jot down a bit for you now and then as I go along.

I am just finishing a fortnight in Loughborough, and it has been quite a pleasant job – an outpatient's clinic connected with a distant hospital where the local people can attend for treatment. I lodged with a friendly, cheerful working family, where I was well fed, and I went to the clinic every day. The master of the house spends Saturday evening at the pub and comes home in a politically belligerent frame of mind. He has a disconcerting way of asking me what I think about something, and when I answer, fixing me with a fierce look and saying "Oh, so that's what you think, is it? Very interesting! Veeery interesting!" I am quite relieved to find him amiably shelling peas for his wife in the back garden on Sunday mornings in a genial mood.

Loughborough is a pleasant small town midway between Nottingham and Leicester. It is famous for 'Loughborough College' which is, as far as I can make out, a large resident technical school teaching everything of that sort from agriculture to art, especially engineering. Students come to it from all over the world, but at present it is taken over by the military.

I thought the name 'Loughborough' was familiar to me, and couldn't think why until they mentioned their carillon, and then I realised 'of course, Bells'! There are famous bell-makers here. and they made the bells for the Sydney University Carillon.

The country around is green and pretty, but not exciting.

It has been grand to have a change from all the housekeeping worries. I had a hectic few days packing and storing my possessions in Newcastle, cleaning up my room and generally putting things in order. I wished I hadn't gone on working until quite such a late date, but with the help of kind friends I was finally pushed onto the train, which was even fuller than they usually are, being holiday time.

Travelling is very difficult. I left ordering a taxi until the day I was leaving, thinking they might forget it, and then I couldn't get one, and had to spend 2 precious hours racing round on my bicycle till I found one in an outlying suburb. You can't take more than you can handle, as there are no porters, and yet, if you send things in the van there is a great chance of their being stolen – one is always hearing of it. The result of clothes-rationing, I suppose. I have had great kindness on Loughborough from a fellow-masseuse, now married and retired, which has been nice. I have spent every evening at her house.

July 26th

Am now in Ipswich, having spent the weekend in Oxford on a farewell visit to Cos. Elfrida Fowler. On Sunday afternoon I went for a conducted tour round some of the colleges with a party consisting chiefly of American soldiers. They take them round every Sunday, and these seemed very interested and impressed.

Coming to Ipswich I chose a train which gave me a couple of hours in Cambridge, where I had not been before. It was little enough, but I just had a glimpse of some of the colleges. They are rather apart from the town, unlike Oxford where the scholastic atmosphere seems to permeate the whole city.

The Cambridge colleges are really breath-takingly lovely. They in a most beautiful setting with green

lawns, fine quadrangles, and behind them the river Cam running between grass covered banks and under bridges, forming the famous 'Backs'. It was a hot day when I was there, and many students were enjoying the sun there and punting on the river. I peeped into several of the libraries and chapels. The chapel of kings College is famous for its beautiful roof, windows and proportions, but the glass had all been removed for the War.

I have not seen any of these eastern Counties before and they are quite different from other parts of England – rather flat, and the soil seems light and sandy so that you get an impression of dryness. It is the first place where I have seen a dry, silvery, summer grass such as we get at home. It is largely agricultural country, and the crops, which are just ripe, look magnificent. It is rather an off-the-track corner of England and the villages are very charming and unspoiled, with lots of Elizabethan architecture. They are also remarkable for their very fine churches, some of them like cathedrals, and large, out of all proportion to the villages they serve.

This part of England has produced the finest landscape painters, Constable being the chief among them. I don't know why it should have inspired them, as it is very quiet country, its chief charm being its tree-lined streams and picturesque buildings. I have just spent a Sunday afternoon on the riverbank at Hatford Mill, a pretty little spot often painted by Constable.

The work here is very nice; it is purely a private practice with the patients all coming to the house. There was to be a car with it, which attracted me, but the owner took it with her for her holiday, so I fell back on a bicycle and pottered about in the evenings after work.

Aug 1st The election results came as a bomb-shell! Most people expected a swing towards Labour, but even their most ardent supporters can hardly have expected such a sweeping victory. I voted for Churchill myself because I felt like giving him a chance at coping with the peace problems after his magnificent war effort, but I felt doubtful if the Conservatives would be venturesome and go-ahead enough to satisfy the seething unrest of three quarters of the population. One senses it strongly among all the young people, the working people and the army. And since the opinion of the country was expressed so strongly and definitely it is as well, they have the power to carry out their reforms. I am sure nothing short of a straight-out Socialist govt. would have satisfied the bulk of the people, and now they have their chance, and, Please God, they won't wreck the country! I have great faith in the common-sense and decency of the average Englishman.

Aug 7th.

And now a greater Bomb-shell – an atomic one this time! It is a sobering and terrifying responsibility! If it had to be discovered, I feel sure the American – British combination is the most likely to make sane use of it in the future. And thank goodness we did win the neck-a-neck race for it! Anyway, to begin with it must surely finish up the Japanese business quickly and cleanly.

Love to all,
Rachel

Dartmouth,
Devon
Aug 28th, 1945

Dear Family,

This is the most beautiful place to find oneself in pleasant summer weather. I only wish I had more time to enjoy it, but the 3 weeks is passing very quickly and the job, though not terribly strenuous fills the days and a good bit of the evenings. However, I have managed to get about a little and the hospital is right on the quayside so that whenever I have a few minutes I can slip out and sit and look at the harbour which is very beautiful and full of interesting activities. The Navy grey is well represented among the ships. There are quite a few destroyers lying at anchor, among them the Beagle and her sister ship which took the surrender of the Germans on the Channel Islands. There are dozens of little M.T.B.s moored head to tail four abreast. They are having their guns and engines removed and are then being sold for £200 as houseboats or what-you-will. Landing barges of all sizes and shapes lie about, from large ones with engines to little ones which must have been towed. They must have had exciting short lives though they seem to have entered a peaceful old age now. This was one of the jumping off places for D. Day and it has been interesting hearing first-hand accounts of it – How the American troops gathered thicker and thicker for weeks beforehand. The Quayside rang night and day to marching feet and clattering mess tins, and the vessels gathered in the harbour. Some people didn't undress for many nights feeling sure that such a massing of forces would inevitably draw air-raids. It was all kept amazingly quiet. In other parts of England, we had no idea what preparations were being made for the invasion, or where.

I went for a trip one afternoon along the amazingly beautiful coast to the South of Dartmouth and in one part came to bomb-shattered houses, damaged roads and scarred rocks, I thought it was the result of a bad raid and mentioned it when I got home. "Oh" they said, "that was the Evacuation". I asked, "What evacuation?" and was told that some time before D-day the inhabitants of 5 villages and many farms were given notice to evacuate their homes by a certain date. Then the American forces practiced their invasion tactics there for many weeks, the coast being considered similar to what they would meet in Normandy, and it got pretty well knocked about in the process. For weeks before D-day nobody was allowed on the harbour-front at Dartmouth, or on the roads in the neighbourhood without permit, as they were packed with convoys.

V.J. Day started quietly, as no one seemed to hear the news at midnight, but by about 9am hooters and whistles started cock-a-doodle- doing, and bells ringing, and the ships were dressed with flags, and those who already gone to work streamed back again to enjoy two days holiday. Many of the ships were thrown open to the public, and I went over a M.T.B. – a very neat little craft, with very cramped quarters for the crew ingeniously fitted in.

At night ships were decorated with lights as were also the parks and square where people danced. Next day street parties were held for the children. They are a popular form of celebration over here, a long trestle table being set up in a quiet dead-end street. It was all very pleasant and cheerful. I went to the hospital but only did a minimum of patients.

While here I have been hearing stories about the blitzes on Plymouth, which must have had a shocking time. It was attacked night after night, and water, gas and everything were knocked out. One Dartmouth woman who had a lot of relations there said she used to spend the day cooking food, and at 4 or 5pm she and her husband would set out in the car to take it to her relations. They usually reached Plymouth just as the blitz was starting there and often had a lot of trouble in delivering it. Then they would pick up people begging to be taken out of the town, and, piling as

many as possible onto the footboards as well as inside, would drive them out and leave them on Dartmoor, where they would just sleep in the open under bushes. They would get home themselves at 1 or 2am and start it all again the next day. This they kept up for nearly 6 months!

I wish someone with a gift for writing would travel all round England and make a record of the stories they hear from ordinary people. The little personal details they add to the stories are what makes them so vivid and moving. And each place has its own individual problems and experiences, and one part of England knew very little about the other parts.

Aunt Rachel's Letters 1945

Newcastle-on-Tyne

Nov 15th, 1945

Dear Babs and Howard.

Thank you for your air-letter, Babs, which arrived on my birthday.

I'm afraid I have treated you very badly lately in the way of letters. There is a sort of feeling that I shall be on my way home so soon now that it is hardly worth writing, which is, of course, absurd and also I have really been very busy and bothered the last few weeks. I came back to Newcastle to do Vera Welton's practice for a fortnight, and to pack up the main part of my luggage and get it ready to go off at short notice. I struck all sorts of unexpected difficulties – couldn't get any packing cases, or any one to undertake to move and store my things until after a week or so search, almost going down on my knees to one carrier after another. Then I found that all the things I had left here when I went south in July were damp and had to be dried off by the gas-fire in my lodgings and carried back and re-packed. I had only been able to get a room for a week and spent a lot of time looking for another, which I managed successfully at last. Added to that the practice was pretty busy, evenings as well as all day, so that at the end of 3 weeks I felt something of a wreck. However, I have now had 2 weeks without work – sewing, washing, sorting, packing etc and my trunks went off yesterday and I feel much relieved.

I go down to London tomorrow to see the shipping agents again and pay a few farewell visits. When I get notice of a passage (which incidentally not likely to be this year), I shall return to Newcastle to say good-bye and collect my small luggage. While the carrier who holds them will send my bigger things to the port of embarkation (wherever that may be!).

Howard must have had a very busy and worrying time over the strike. I hope he has caught up with all the back work by now. What a shame being let down by his engineers! This strike fever is catching. I had an air-letter from Thea yesterday, all about her visit to you and full of enthusiasm for the family.

We have had a delightful autumn, but the air is getting much colder the last few days, and November fogs are upon us.

A parcel may come to you soon, addressed to me. It is the outcome of a rather foolish purchase, I fear. I have been wracking my brains for many months for some little presents to bring out to the young people. The girls are not so difficult, but the boys! There is really nothing suitable in the shops. Toys are just rubbish, if any at all, and things like cameras, fountain pens, leather goods etc non-existent.

At an art exhibition in Ipswich there was a nice little wooden carved model of a Suffolk Punch horse which I thought might appeal to John (they said 'copies obtainable' in the catalogue) so as a last resort I ordered one by post. To my horror the man wrote back that he was doing it for me, but. As the plaster-of-Paris was very frail, it would have to be well packed! I should have had more sense, but I pictured it in wood! Anyway, after some more correspondence we have decided that, once packed, it would be better to go direct. I would have got out of it if I could. Don't mention it to John, as it may not be worth giving, and will probably arrive in pieces anyway.

I am spending next week in London hoping to find out something more about shipping, and then pay one or two short farewell visits. I hope to spend Xmas with the Gawnes.

Much love to you all,
Rachel.

Aunt Rachel's Letters 1945

c/o Susie Mack
Swanmore, Sussex
Dec 7th, 1945

Dear Howard and Babs,

A Happy Xmas to you all. I hope you have a very jolly day. I expect to be with the Gawnes in Bristol for it. I was going there next week but I got an SOS from the hospital I was at in Dartmouth to go back there for a few weeks if I could, and as there seems no likelihood of my getting away for a while yet, I thought I had better for a fortnight. Then I shall stay with the Gawnes for a fortnight after Xmas, and after that my plans are a bit vague.

Perhaps I shall have heard something more definite by the middle of Jan. Australia House is apparently under authority from the government. When they are told a ship is available for their people, they send notice to those at the top of their priority list. They said there might be a ship in January, but before I left said that I'd be safe to take a job till the end of Jan, as it would more likely be Feb. Anyway, it doesn't matter much to me as I can fill in the time quite happily. I have just paid a round of short farewell visits – Miss Berthou in Kent, Ailsa Bragg (Cullen) on her farm in Sussex and Marjorie and Jim Simpson (late of Rose Bay) and a few miles from them.

Now I am with Susie for a few days. They have given up their London flat as Arthur's work was moved to Portsmouth. They are sharing a house with Arthur's mother, which is proving an all but impossible arrangement, but they hope it won't be for long, as they are hoping for a passage to Australia next year when Arthur retires.

It is getting chilly now, but we have had a delightful autumn, which is a help with the fuel problem.

I see by the papers that you are likely to have a rotten Xmas with strikes in all directions. I hope you are preparing for emergencies with an open fire in the backyard! The world is certainly a thorough mess!

When I last heard from Thea you were at Fitzroy Falls, where I hope you had a good change and a rest.

I had a few days in London on my way down here. It looks very shabby but is beginning to be tidied up a bit. It is no longer so full of foreign troops but theatres, restaurants etc are still packed and high prices and queues prevail everywhere.

They were beginning to get pictures back to the National Gallery and I enjoyed seeing them – reproductions give no idea of the originals.

I spent a few days lately at a hotel in Brighton with Gwen Roberts and enjoyed the luxurious rest. She was convalescing after her spinal operation and is almost well now. Brighton is a nice town if you don't expect too much of the seaside part of it. It is all built in the Regency period and they are pleasant looking old houses. There is a fantastic "Pavilion" built by George IV – a curious-looking palace built in the Chinese fashion and very garish and ugly, but an interesting museum piece.

Much love to you all, and all the best in 1946.

Rachel.