

## High Wych History - Wartime - The Home Guard.



The first half year or so of the second world war was known as the “phoney war” Hostilities only really started with the invasion of the low countries in the spring of 1940. There were some notable changes in High Wych though. There were the East End children who were billeted with many a family. There were air raid shelters in many a garden. Many young men were away, serving in the army.

And then there was the Home Guard. By way of a radio broadcast on May 14<sup>th</sup> 1940, Anthony Eden, the Secretary of State for War, announced the formation of what was initially called the Local Defence Volunteers and invited people to join. Men between the ages of 17 and 65 in Britain, who were not in military service but wished to defend their country against an invasion, should enroll in the LDV at their local police station. The announcement was met with a great deal of enthusiasm on the part of the population, with 250,000 volunteers attempting to sign up in the first seven days. By July that number had increased to 1.5 million



**The High Wych Home Guard Platoon in the school playground. Those in the know may recognize some faces.**

That dedication and vigour was also felt amongst our own local population A High Wych platoon was formed and became part of the 11<sup>th</sup> Herts Battalion. The fact that there was some disagreement about the role of the Home Guard, how active or passive they should be and the delay in the arrival of

uniforms and other equipment did not diminish that enthusiasm, either nationally or locally. Handling fire arms was a point of discussion. On that subject : the story goes that one HW Home Guardsman once shot himself in the foot.

Home Guard men were either too old or too young to be called up for “normal service” or those with reserved occupations . Mike Elsdon, my father in law worked at Holbrooks in Harlow where his work as an engineer was important for the war effort as was his young colleague John Sapsford, also in the home guard. Mike was a corporal. Mr. Mabey, the schoolmaster was the sergeant due to his experience in the first world war. After he was called up in the regular army, it is believed, Len Helmer took his place. Other members were Bill Camp, Mr Carter, Bert Clements, Bill Clements, Phil Clements, Bill Ginn, Jack Mascall, Mr Matthews, Chris Mynott, Leonard Neal, Tom Oakley, David Prior, Jimmy Pyper, Stanley Saban, Mr. Springham, Alfred Ward, Mr. A. Ward, Mr Wentworth-Stanley, Mr. White, Alan White, Mr Wilson and Ginger (Alfred) Ward. The officer in charge was a (Major) H.G Haddock who reputedly was a bank manager at Barclays. A Colonel Grant was also mentioned. Perhaps the officers were attached to battalion headquarters in Bishops Stortford. Keith Holden and Eric Matthews, both too young to join the Home Guard proper were working as “runners”.



**They don't like it up-em !!!! - Training in the fields at the back of the church – Sayes Park farm just visible in the background**

The Home Guard spent their time doing military drills, guarding railways and roads, often on night duty, when they patrolled the line between the old Burnt Mill village and Sawbridgeworth. They were involved in guard duty at local airports such as Hunsdon and at least once they were involved with bomb disposal (at Moor Hall). Looking back at it now it is easy to poke fun at them and indeed the Home Guard was never tested in a real combat situation. But do not forget that in 1940, 1941, and even 1942 the threat of invasion was a real one. Personally I am sure that if there had been an invasion the Home Guard would have risen to the challenge.

Initial research on the High Wych Home Guard was difficult. Luckily calls for help, both in the Link but also in the Herts and Essex Observer provided impressive results. Terry Wilson told me that his late father, a member of the Stortford Home Guard once went on an exercise with the High Wych boys at Allens Green airfield. Two afternoons spent at county archives provided some information as well. I now know that Mr. Mabey was a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant not just a sergeant. I also established that voluntary censorship prevented the newspapers, including of course those published locally, from publishing details about HG activities. “Careless talk costs lives” they said in those days, or in the language of the enemy : “Feind hoert mit”.



In 1991 Ken Cook published an article on the High Wych Home Guard in the Herts and Essex Observer. This was brought to my attention by one of the daughters of Leonard Neal (of Newhouse Farm) whose name I stupidly misspelt in last month's article. She, the daughter that is, gave me a complete list of the High Wych Home Guard, aka the 10<sup>th</sup> Platoon of C company Sawbridgeworth. The 10<sup>th</sup> platoon also included people from Gilston, Eastwick and Spellbrook. Lieutenant L.H. Neal was in command and 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenants Helmer and Carter were section officers. In total the platoon numbered 100 men. You will find this list at the end of this article.



Another contact was Wendy Oxborough, John Sapsford's daughter. John S. a native of High Wych was, amongst many other things, active in the Rivers Nursery project ( <http://riversnurseryorchard.org.uk/> ) with which many of you will be familiar. John wrote about his family his, friends, and his professional background. His extensive archive is proving to be a goldmine. No doubt I will quote from it in future articles.



Mike Elsdon and John Sapsford, colleagues at Holbrooks joined the Home Guard on the very same day. Initially at least, John Sapsford writes :

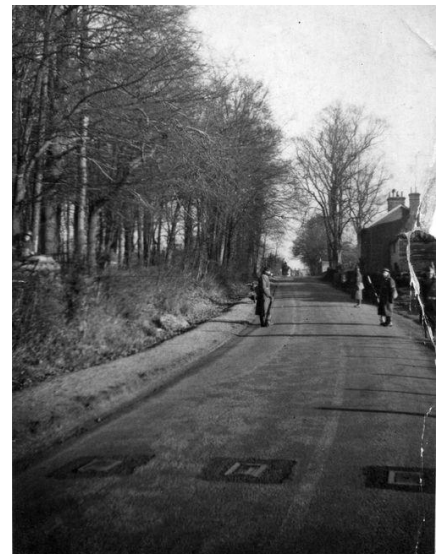
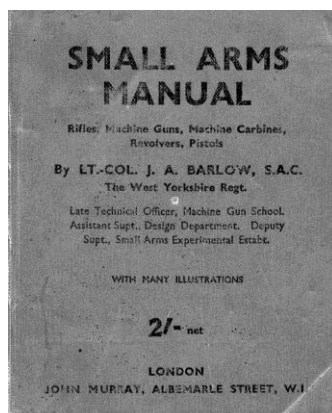
***“There was little in the way of weapons. We had some firing practice with a Boer War type single loading carbine owned by the village policeman, PC Oliver. We also had a normal Lee Enfield Rifle Soon however we got a full complement of American Springfield rifles which were very accurate indeed. For live firing we used a gravel pit near Pole Hall Farm at the end of Redricks Lane. This had high cliff faces but even so it was not unusual for people to send a round over the top towards Harlow. But as this was in Essex nobody seemed to think it mattered very much”***

Another extract :

***Mike Elsdon and I also took an interest in the art of camouflage. We made a sort of cape out of netting which was decorated with strips of coloured hessian, greens, yellows, browns and reds. The effect was quite remarkable in that one could stand in front of trees or bushes and be quite undetectable from a few yards away provided one kept still. Mike used this outfit during an exercise we had with the Kings Troop of the Grenadier Guards. They were “attacking” Sawbridgeworth from the Essex side. Mike was in a forward observation position in a low tree beside the Hatfield Heath Road. The Guards pass right underneath without spotting him .....***

The High Wych and Sawbridgeworth platoons were indeed closely intertwined. They shared an intelligence unit. They jointly guarded the railway line between Burnt Mill and Sawbridgeworth stations. They jointly were on duty guarding the local airfields.

The platoon also contained a number of the finest poachers in the district. As Leonard Neal told the Observer in 1991 : ***“Coming back from exercises many a haversack contained a rabbit”***.



**The platoon out and about on a Sunday in February 1941 on the road entering HW from Gilston. In the middle : the cover of a small arms manual.**

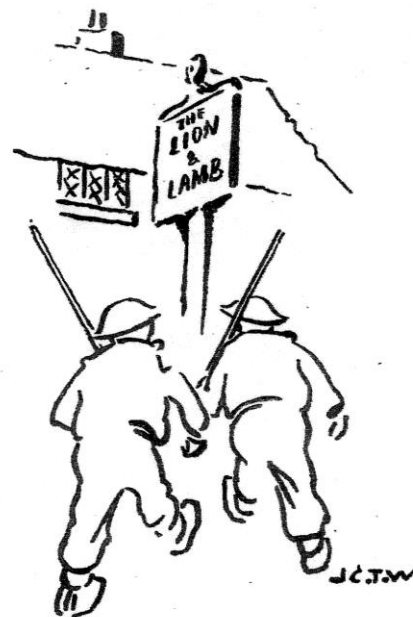


This is what John Sapsford tells us about the above picture

*Believe it or not, The Sawbridgeworth area Intelligence Section. Lieut Davies of 'Falconers' was in charge with me as Corporal. Seated on left is Mr Pyle who built the Forebury Estate and behind me is Mr Panrucker, a London Bank Manager. I recall that one wet day we were sitting chatting in Falconers. Somehow the subject of hats arose - I mentioned that, apart from the Home Guard issue and my old school boater, I had no hats. Mr Panrucker was shocked "But how" he asked "do you go up to Town?"*

## HIGH WYCH

REMEMBRANCE DAY in High Wych was kept on Sunday by a special service in the church. A large congregation attended, including the High Wych Home Guard (under 2nd Lieut. Mabey), a contingent of the Sawbridgeworth Branch of the British Legion (under Mr. Cole and Mr. Orsman) and the High Wych Company of Girl Guides (under Mrs. Wentworth Stanley). The hymns were played by the Sawbridgeworth Silver Band, conducted by Mr. Ridgwell, and at the conclusion of the service the bugler sounded The Last Post and Reveille, which were followed by the National Anthem. The Vicar (Rev. C. M. Lamb) took the service and preached. Afterwards the Home Guard, British Legion and Girl Guides were inspected by Lieut.-Colonel Charles Henderson, who had with him Flying Officer Wentworth Stanley and Lieut. Cole of the Coldstream Guards. Led by the band, the proceedings ended by a march past, the salute being taken by Colonel Henderson. The church collection for the Earl Haig Fund amounted to £6 1s. 1d.



"Warriors brave, go gallily forth . . . to fight!"

Information and photographs for this article was supplied by Nina Elsdon, Nora Holden, John Oliver, Wendy Oxborough, Elizabeth Reeve, Dr. Sarah Turner, Janet van de Bilt, Terry Wilson, the staff at HALS, the Herts & Essex Observer and a few people who prefer to remain anonymous. Contributions to and help with my ongoing High Wych History Project are always welcome. Contact me at [theo@vandebilt.co.uk](mailto:theo@vandebilt.co.uk) or phone me at 01279 725468

No.10 Platoon.

Officer Commanding - Lieut.L.H.Neal.  
Section Officers - (2/Lt.H.E.Carter.  
(2/Lt.L.A.C.Helmer.

Gilston & Eastwick.

		<u>High Wych.</u>	
Pte. Armstrong	W.	Pte. Adams	T.
" Brett	J.W.	" Bentley	P.V.
L/C Brett	A.	" Bentley	V.R.
Pte. Brett	P.L.	" Bird	G.
" Brown	H.C.	" Blackaby	L.F.
" Bush	W.	" Brown	L.J.
" Clarke	H.	" Camp	W.G.
" Clarke	K.C.	" Carter	A.R.
Sgt. Cottee	P.M.	" Chadwick	R.E.
Pte. Crang	A.G.	" Clements	H.V.
" Crang	L.J.	" Clements	P.J.
Cpl. Ganner	H.E.	" Clements	W.E.
Pte. Hall	D.A.	" Cutmore	S.
" Mead	W.J.	Cpl. Davies	J.T.
" Moncur	J.M.	Pte. Davis	L.F.
" Morris	T.H.	" Dixon	R.J.
L/C Neilson	T.H.	" Elsdon	M.B.
Pte. Pearson	A.	Pte. Fish	A.H.G.
" Swann	P.J.	" Felstead	H.H.
" Thear	W.C.	Sgt. Ginn	W.G.
" Turner	S.W.	Pte. Howe	A.
" Tant	D.W.	" Kempthorne	D.W.
" Woodley	E.C.	" Mascall	E.C.
" Woolner	W.H. (Civ.Def)	" Maskell	G.
" White	V.D.K.	" Maskell	J.L.
		Cpl. Mathews	F.G.
		Pte. Prior	D.G.
		" Pyper	J.
		" Reed	E.A.
		" Rix	L.J.
		L/C Robinson	L.A.
		L/C Robinson	W.T.
		Pte. Rockett	W.T.
		" Ruse	W.
		" Saban	E.V.
		" Saban	S.V.
		" Sapsford	W.J.
		" Springham	A.E.
		" Springham	D.W.
		" Squirrell	C.W.
		" Tyler	L.J.
		" Walker	F.G.
		Sgt. Ward	A.E.
		Pte. Ward	A.W.
		" Ward	R.C.
		" Wentworth-Stanley	C.S.D.
		L/C White	W.
		Cpl. White	W.H.
		Pte. Willison	R.W.H.
		" White	A.R.

Spellbrook

Pte. Abra	P.W.
" Arkell	J.B.
" Bass	P.W.
" Blake	A.
" Bull	W.L.
" Clark	R.J.
" Cowell	A.E.
" Cranknell	H.
" Davidson	A.
" Doubleday	A.P.
Sgt. Dyson	A.
Pte. Hatchett	E.
" Hayler	D.R.
Cpl. Lewis	S.
L/C McKenzie	A.
Pte. Millbank	J.
" Mingay	F.G.
" Mingay	H.H.
L/C Partridge	C.R.
Pte. Perry	S.C.
" Sarling	A.H.
" Shorter	E.
" Vintner	C.E.
" Walker	J.
" Walker	K.J.

G. ROBERTS  
SPEARING