

High Wych History - WW2 – The Home Front

The first 8 months of the Second World War became known as the phony war. Compared to what happened later it was a relatively quiet period. Nevertheless, an increasing number of young men were away fighting for king and country. Those who were excused (unfit or in a reserved occupation) were in the home guard and special ID cards were issued to those people. East End school children were billeted amongst us, even some Jewish refugees made it to High Wych. In St. James's church yard I find a gravestone commemorating an Albert Goldschmidt who died in 1944. According to the Herts & Essex Observer some 31,000 "German aliens" entered the UK during the second quarter of 1939. What was not made clear was that most of those must indeed have been Jewish Germans.

Food production was stepped up and a lot of common land was brought under the plough. Newspapers regularly published the new minimum wages for farm workers. Whether these were actually adhered to I do not know. German and Italian prisoners of war were set to work on local farms.

Private people were encouraged to grow their own vegetables and keep chickens. Nina Elsdon tells me how she was offered four young hens by a man from Nazeing "at a very good price". Nina, a young housewife then, freshly arrived in High Wych did not know much of these things. "I still remember cycling back from there, a sack with two chickens each at either side of the handlebars. It was quite a wobbly ride!"

Young women were drafted into work for the war effort or encouraged to volunteer. Thomas Rivers Nurseries employed quite a lot of land army women. Those of you that have read Elisabeth Waugh's history of the company will have already read about it. I may return to the subject elsewhere. Meanwhile here is a picture.



Rivers workers during ww2: Joe Tucker, Pnonie Clements, Walter, Ted Chapel, Herbert Newland and Ruby Sanford (later to become Ruby Kempthorne)

Walter Lawrence, the Sawbridgeworth company also took on many workers, most of them women and many of those from High Wych. Originally builders and joiners Lawrence's became an essential part of the war effort. A lot of their success was due to their role in the manufacture of the Mosquito airplane. That plane, still containing wooden parts was originally was thought too old fashioned. However, the skill and ingenuity of the designers, engineers and staff at both Lawrences and the Havilland proved unbeatable. Consecutive layers of plywood were bent, moulded and glued together resulting in an aircraft that could fly at 275 miles an hour. Bailey bridges and pontoons were also manufactured there.



High Wych girls on their way to work at Larence's, Carrie Camp on left – At work assembling a Mosquito

One must remember that the risk of invasion was very real. Bombing raids such as those that killed Percy Wilson were not uncommon. Mr. Mabey, the head master in the last few months before he himself went off to war, saw to it that the school had its own air raid shelter. Many private houses had shelters some of them even had electricity installed! The Times reported on a phrase book for invading German soldiers. Choice phrases from it were "Are you the mayor", "Open all cupboards", "Give me the cash" and "If you lie you will be shot". In retrospect this may seem funny, but at the time it definitely was not. Many young women were also asked to follow courses in first aid. It was deemed necessary people were prepared in case of air raids. The courses took place on the premises of St. Johns Ambulance in Old Harlow. Jean Pedder and Nina Elsdon both remember taking lessons from Doctors Booth and Dipple.



An air raid shelter in Jill Clark's garden Albert Goldschmidt's gravestone in our church yard

Normal life meanwhile went on. People got married, children were born, people died. Dances were organized as were whist drives musical evenings, cinema shows etc. most of those taking place in the Village Hall many of them in aid of the special "Comfort Fund" set up to raise money for local men serving in the armed forces. The Womens' Institute also did its best with its monthly meetings. Mrs. Hart presided; other regulars were Mrs. Mabey, Mrs. Wentworth Stanley and Miss Dunn. They too collected money for the High Wych soldiers. They did so through competitions concerning cleaning and renovating old clothes or the most amusing anecdote. By the end of the war, so the Revd. Banister claimed, the Comfort Fund had sent more than 4780 food parcels to the troops. There was also a special "welcome home fund" which collected over £ 520 to be divided amongst the soldiers returning home to High Wych. Al in all the amount collected for both funds must have run into thousands, quite incredible for what was at that time a relatively poor small village.

Rabbits in War Time

The question of the food value of wild rabbits, which plague many parts of the country, is bound to arise if the war is of any duration. The R.S.P.C.A., while believing that these creatures are extremely harmful to agriculture, and should be kept down to reasonable numbers, strongly urges landowners, farmers and others to use only humane methods when catching rabbits for market purposes. The steel-toothed trap is not only cruel, but unnecessary.

Details of humane methods may be obtained from the Chief Secretary, R.S.P.C.A., 105, Jermyn Street, London, S.W. 1.

HIGH WYCH.

WOMEN'S INSTITUTE.—The April meeting was presided over by Mrs. Hart. A demonstration on "Hat Renovations" was given by Mrs. Lawman, it was much appreciated and some useful hints were given. An egg collection was taken for Haymeads. The monthly competition, the best dish of eggs produced from members' own poultry, was judged by Mrs. Dunn, the winner being Mrs. Springham. The social half-hour, arranged by Mrs. Stanley and Mrs. Mabey, was occupied in guessing noises, the winner being Miss Reeve.

Beer Will Be Weaker

Stronger Varieties Mainly Affected

The Brewers' Society announces that owing to acute shortage of labour in the malting industry, and to conserve available malt, the Ministry of Food has decided that the average gravity of beer shall be reduced by 5 per cent.

It is anticipated that in the main this will affect the stronger beers, and that there will be little or no change in the character of ordinary draught beers.

Lord Woolton has stated that the price of beer would not be reduced.

The Herts & Essex reports from the homefront in the early war years



KEEP THIS CARD SAFELY

NATIONAL SERVICE ACTS

Certificate of Registration

Occ. Classn. No. 466-10 Registration No. BNF 16310
 Holder's Name ELSDON: Michael Bishop
 Home Address Thatched Cottage, High Wych Lane, HIGH WYCH, SAWBRIDGEWORTH, HERTS
 Date of Birth 22.9.1910
 Holder's Signature M.B. Elsdon

READ THIS CAREFULLY

Care should be taken not to lose this Certificate, but in the event of loss, application for a duplicate should be made to the nearest office of the Ministry of Labour and National Service.

IF YOU CHANGE YOUR ADDRESS, ETC., YOU MUST COMPLETE THE APPROPRIATE SPACE ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THIS CERTIFICATE AND POST IT AT ONCE. A new Certificate of Registration will then be sent to you.

If you voluntarily join H.M. Forces you should hand this certificate to the appropriate Service Officer. You should not voluntarily give up your employment because you have been registered for military service.

This certificate must be produced on request to a constable in uniform.

A person who uses or lends this certificate or allows it to be used by any other person with intent to deceive, renders himself liable to heavy penalty.

Chris Mynott and Italian POWs

Mike Elsdon's Military ID card

By 1942 the tide of war was turning. Hitler's invasion of Russia proved as problematic for the Nazis as it had been for Napoleon's army in 1812. Montgomery's desert rats were more than a match for Rommel's troops in North Africa. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour brought the US into the conflict. The UK did not stand on its own anymore.

Locally a lot of changes had to do with the airfields. At Stansted the Americans built the longest runway in the country. At Hunsdon an airfield had been built as a satellite to North Weald. Nearer to home a landing ground had already been used near Mathams Wood during the first World War. This was now extended and became the base for many RAF operations. Those who are interested in both local and military history should read the excellent "Where the Lysanders flew" by Paul Doyle.



A Lysander aircraft

With the airfields came pilots and support staff who soon started to turn up in local pubs at dances etc. Of course these British and American airmen in their glamorous uniforms made quite an impression on the local girls. Romance blossomed on a number of occasions. At least two High Wych girls ended up marrying their American sweethearts.

The end of the war, when it did come in May 1945, was cause for great celebration of course. On the evening of Wednesday 16th May the men from the home guard built an enormous bonfire on the playing fields. People joined in a large circle, singing, dancing and cheering. Fireworks added to the excitement. The day also coincided with the opening club night of the HW Home Guard Association, formed to maintain the friendships forged in that organisation over the war years. To mark the occasion the Village Hall was thrown open to all. Singing dancing and merry making went on there well in to the night.

WEDDING.—The marriage took place at St. James's Church, High Wych, on Saturday, of Pte. Henry Irvin Wood, eldest son of Mr. and Mrs. H. Wood, of Barre, Mass., U.S.A. and Miss Hilda May Ward, eldest daughter of Mr. and Mrs. A. Ward, of High Wych. The Rev. E. Bannister (vicar) officiated. The bride, who was given away by her father, wore a blue coat and dress. She was attended by her two sisters, Misses M. and B. Ward, dressed in blue and black. The best man was Sergt. Van Houton, U.S.A. A reception was held at the Village Hall, about 40 guests attending, including Americans, who brought their own band.

VICTORY CELEBRATIONS.—A huge bonfire, built upon the playing field in a very short time by Home Guards, was the object of attraction for nearly everyone in and around the village on Wednesday evening. Fireworks added to the excitement, while most people joined in a large circle round the fire, singing, dancing and cheering. Someone passed the hat round and a good collection was made in aid of the Welcome Home Fund. The evening coincided with the opening club night of the High Wych and District Home Guard Association, which, to mark the occasion, threw the hall open to all. After the bonfire many gathered there to continue the singing and dancing well into the night. VE-Day itself was a little quieter, but just as enjoyable. Mrs. Buxton initiated an afternoon's sport on the lawn at the Manor of Groves for both children and adults.

A Treat

On Saturday there was another great day, Mr. Rawes, of Messrs. Rivers & Son, giving a treat to all High Wych school-children.

The afternoon started with a fancy dress parade, judged by Mrs. Gordon Burton and Mrs. Kampe. The children went in procession from the school to the Playing Field, where the judging took place.

Prizes were awarded as follows:

Best Turn-out—1 Elizabeth Prior. (a Fairy), 2 Robert Springham (Cricketer), 3 John Oliver (Robin Hood). Most original—1 Jill Mabey (Mrs. Sew and Sew), 2 Barbara Manning (Hawaiian Girl), 3 Adrian Blackaby (Highwayman).

The Herts & Essex reports on High Wych in 43-44-45

Many more celebrations occurred during the following months. One such was a childrens' fancy dress parade which took place on the afternoon of Saturday 21st July. Valerie Ruse (nee Wylds and 5 at the time) remembers it well: "All five of us took part. A neighbour, Mrs Tyler, had prepared our costumes. Young Michael went as a jockey but sadly had no horse. Friend Roger Kempthorne also dressed as a jockey but he did have a toy horse. My brother should have had the horse I remember thinking". Valerie also kindly gave me the photograph on the facing page. After the parade the children were treated to a celebration tea in the Village Hall.

The war had changed High Wych lives in many ways. Before the Second World War many villagers had never even travelled as far as London. By 1945 their formerly rather isolated existences had been opened up. Many of those who had been in the services had travelled to far flung parts of the world such as The Middle and Far East, Africa and mainland Europe. Those who had stayed close to home had welcomed into their community many people from not only other parts of the UK but also many nationalities be they service men and women or prisoners of war.

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August 1945 – The Wylds Children get ready for the parade

Thanks go to Jill Clark, Nina Elsdon, Lily Mynott, John Oliver Jean Pedder, Valerie Ruse, Bert Search, Eric Willison, Elisabeth Reeve on behalf of the Herts and Essex Observer and as always the people at HALS, aka County Archives. Please bear in mind these articles would be impossible without your contributions, your memories, stories and photographs. Get in touch!! Contact me at: theo@vandebilt.co.uk or phone me at 01279 725468.