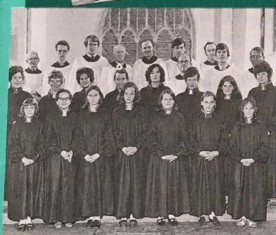


ASHWELL

Village life in war and peace

1939-1975



Norman Gurney and Albert Sheldrick

beef), 1 egg per fortnight. Cheese, sugar and fats were also rationed. Margarine was 8d to 10d per pound. Eggs, when you could find them, 10 for 6d. Bread was not rationed, dried egg-powder could be bought, but coffee was unobtainable.

The year 1940 was a terrible time for Britain, although worse for others. The Nazis invaded Denmark and Norway; the Netherlands and Belgium fell; Italy, our ally in the First World War declared war on Britain and France, the latter partitioned into occupied France and Vichy France, governed by Marshal Petain.

The Lord Mayor of London set up an Air Raid Distress Fund. All towns and villages were asked to subscribe to it. John Newsom, the County Education Officer, visited schools throughout the county to advise on air-raid precautions for children, as some parents threatened to take their children away from school unless shelters were provided. John Bailey of Westbury House dug out an entrance on his lawn to the old Page's Brewery cellars for the use of West End folks as an air-raid shelter.

In May, due to the sinking of so many cargo ships, there was a paper shortage; householders were asked to save all clean newspapers, to be collected by the dustmen and in June our Member of Parliament, Sir Arnold Wilson's plane was shot down and he was reported missing. The Local Defence Volunteers (LDV) was formed and a system of fire watching against enemy attacks was ordered.

In July, the Ministry of Food, anxious to ensure that surplus fruit from gardens and allotments was not wasted, instructed that local arrangements be made to collect either in the raw state or in the form of jam and bottled fruit by Women's Institutes or other local bodies. Permits were given for extra sugar for the purpose, and bee-keepers were allowed sugar to feed their bees in winter.

In September, funds were raised to build more of the famous Spitfire fighter planes. There were collections of cash and any kind of aluminium; saucepans, milk bottle tops, etc. Letchworth raised £5,000. An exhibition of fragments of bombs, an unexploded incendiary bomb and other bits and pieces connected with the war was held at Bennett's works in Letchworth. There was a searchlight unit near Beverly Farm, which may have caused a Hurricane fighter to crash, just behind Steeple Morden church; fortunately the pilot escaped and young Aubrey Wright gave him a lift on his bike to the nearest telephone. Then Aubrey dashed back to the blazing plane to warn the onlookers of the danger of exploding ammunition.

Then there was what the locals called the 'Wednesday bomber' which came over regularly on Wednesdays, but this time flew low over the village and dropped a land mine in a field off Trap Lane, Steeple Morden, causing a crater big enough to have accommodated the nearby Green Man Pub. How fortunate that it dropped so far from the village. Other Ashwellians nicknamed it 'Old Faithful', as it would circle round the Church Tower to get its bearings for a bombing run on the neighbouring airfields. It may have been the same plane about which Dr Sheila Moynihan writes as follows: "During the war I was a civilian Medical Officer and always on call to the two aerodromes. I was given a special pass to go between Steeple Morden and Bassingbourn as the intervening road was closed at night.

I also recall that just after midnight on 22 July 1941 a Junkers 88 was rammed

by a Canadian pilot who was under training at Steeple Morden. Most of the Wellington came down in a field of ripe barley next to our garden and burst into flames, the heat of the burning plane making it impossible for me to do anything. The Junkers fell in a field on the other side of Ashwell Street and a clip of machine gun bullets fell on our doorstep. We were under guard for three days when no one was allowed to approach until all the bodies had been found." Arthur Kirchin, a member of the Royal Observer Corps, said the JU88 was based in Holland and as the pilot was believed to have been a Cambridge undergraduate, he had a very good knowledge of this area and was believed to have been responsible for a number of successful sorties over East Anglia.

Stanley Revill told me quite recently that on the morning of 22 July he, a teenager at the time, went with a friend to see the wreckage. In Hunts Close, the field behind the Lucas Lane bungalows, he saw the bodies of two German airmen. Stanley remembers especially the hands of the pilot which he said were smooth and perfectly manicured, and that he was decorated with the Iron Cross. At 7.30 the next morning I was sent to repair some damaged roofs. I saw the propeller of one of the planes propped up against what used to be the Wagon and Horses Pub at Springhead. There were several holes through the slated roof of Playground Cottage adjoining the Recreation Ground.

PC Legge, Ashwell's resident Police Officer, told me that he caught a man taking home the Wellington's radio set.

When Roy York, well known as a writer for Radio and Television, heard about the forthcoming publication of this book, he sent us the following reminiscence entitled 'Anecdotes of an Evacuee'.

I was one of the many lucky children to be evacuated to Ashwell in 1939. After an initial billet which only lasted a few weeks, I was eventually placed with Bill and Phoebe Barton.

The country was a world most London children knew very little or nothing about. We were suddenly surrounded by fruit, eggs, water, fields, haystacks, cow-plops and mud.

Some of us went mad. Our eagerness to eat as many apples as possible, jump up and down on haystacks, tear our clothes, get covered in dirt, fight and make a lot of noise was bound to have upset some villagers. Our behaviour must have been particularly trying to those kind people who had taken us into their homes. One slight restraint in my case was that I lived opposite Mr Legge, the village policeman.

My ultimate folly was the morning after a Junkers 88 collided in mid-air with a Wellington bomber. Parts of both crews and wreckage of the aircraft were spread over a wide area, much of it on land behind the Cricketers Inn and in the fields next to the Appleton house.

Eddie Trusson, another evacuee, and I decided we must get some souvenirs. Two days later Mr Legge called. With Bill and Phoebe Barton present we all stood in the little living-room of Number 4, Station Road.

'What have you got from the wreckage?' he asked.

Mr Legge stared straight at me.

I tried to avoid his eyes. 'Nothing.' 'Don't lie to me', he said loudly. 'Ronnie (he named a village boy) said you showed him a belt of machine-gun bullets.' I felt my face flush at being caught out.

'Come on, Roy. What have you got?' Phoebe asked quietly.

I told them.

As Mr Legge removed the last of the three boxes of live bullets and cannon shells from our shed, I heard him say, 'That wee devil has enough ammunition here to blow up