

Woking History Society

e-journal



VE Day jigsaw completed by Jenny Mukerji

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Welcome to the 2nd edition of the Woking History Society's e-journal. Judging by your comments, the first edition was very well received so I hope that you enjoy this one. As we have just passed the 75th Anniversary of VE Day, the focus is on the 2nd World War and we have articles about evacuees, Woking and Stalingrad, Byfleet in the War, and some personal reminiscences of life in Woking and in the Services. The 'snippets' this month are based on the restrictions put in place during the Plague year of 1665. How closely they resemble 'lockdown' today!

We have had some excellent publicity this month. Richard and Rosemary Christophers are featured in May's edition of Surrey Life as Lightbox volunteers and 'Surrey Characters'. The article starts with the words *'behind many of Surrey's favourite venues, a group of dedicated volunteers help to keep the wheels turning. At the Lightbox in Woking one particular couple have been involved as heritage volunteers over two decades.'* It goes on to say that they have been associated with the Lightbox since its beginning and praises their work with cataloguing, archiving, research and exhibition programmes. It mentions that they have both been associated with the Woking History Society since its early

days and that Richard is the President.

We had more good publicity from BBC Radio Surrey on 'Surrey Day' on May 2nd when I did a broadcast on *'60 seconds on Woking'*. When we were asked to do it, my first thought was how on earth do you pack Woking into 60 seconds but, in fact, you can get quite a lot in. I decided on my topics and practised with a stop watch until I got it on target. The next challenge was recording it. The producer had told me what to do, but, of course, it didn't work so I had to use a different App and this worked well. I discovered that the art of recording is not to think about it too much or you make a mistake, hesitate or stumble. I did it about 6 times before I was happy and asked family and friends to listen to it as they are always keen to point out what you've done wrong! I sent it off to the producer and he was very happy.

I hope to get this e-journal out about every 6 weeks and I rely on you to send me articles for it. Many thanks to those who have already done so. Pictures are always welcome as we don't have access to our normal supply via the Lightbox. Please send articles and pictures to historywoking@gmail.com

Helen Gristwood

Summer 1945 – home time at last for evacuated schools

With the end of the war in Europe in May 1945, Woking's temporary wartime residents could leave. Among them were the staff and children of schools that had been brought to the area in the first wave of evacuation as the war began and in the hasty relocation of schools from coastal counties when invasion looked imminent some months later. In the emergency situation of the first week of September 1939, 2600 extra children were in the Woking area. The pupils of twenty London County Council schools, from south west London and the northern edge of Surrey, were in the Urban District. About one third of them had gone home by Christmas, to a London which had not, contrary to the fears and expectations of those who had planned the evacuation of schoolchildren, yet been devastated by bombing raids. Though another twelve schools arrived in 1940, pupil numbers continued to fall throughout the war.

From the first few days of the war, parents of evacuees in Woking came to see them. The boys' County School, close to the station, offered its hall as a Sunday afternoon meeting place. Woking was so close to home, well served, as we know, by rail. Visiting parents could see for

themselves how their evacuated children were faring. And the answer, during the first months of the war, was ambiguous. There was no chance of each school meeting together daily. There were no lessons in school buildings to begin with at all. Regulations required that no school could open without adequate air raid shelters – and the shelters were still being built. It was January 1940 before the last of the Woking schools reopened for the first time since the end of the previous summer term. No wonder that some families had decided that it was better to be together, though without formal education for the children, in London, than to be separated, though with patchy education, with the children in Woking.

Co-operation and hard work among the visiting and resident school staffs sorted out makeshift routines. Evacuee and local school populations on the whole shared school buildings half a day each, and found local halls, rooms in private houses, space in a cricket pavilion and at a golf club, which small groups could use for the other half of the day. There was a lot of moving around, there was a lot of improvisation, especially as the evacuee schools were without equipment of their own, not so much as a text book, until supplies were sent from London.

Presently, in London itself, the authorities acknowledged that their evacuation schemes were being ignored or rejected and from December 1939 emergency schools began to be opened for the growing

other visiting schools which were mixed together and henceforth known as LCC Groups. By 1945 there were few of these children left. Once emergency schooling became well established in London, very few



Evacuees by the Basingstoke Canal in 1941

numbers of children in need of education who were there with nothing to do. They drew their teachers from the staffs of the schools which had been evacuated.

children left home to start their school careers as evacuees, and among the original evacuees, in the course of nearly 6 years a great many had inevitably left school for ever.

With reduced pupil and staff numbers the evacuated infant and junior schools, for children between the ages of 5 and 11, tended to lose their individual identity. In Woking several were absorbed into the local schools with which they had been sharing, while accommodation was found for

In Woking twelve to fourteen-year-olds attended Central Schools for their secondary education. Several of the London schools in the urban district were able to fit in with these senior schools. London Central Schools, however, were not the same as Central Schools in Surrey. They

selected their pupils at the age of 12 and taught them until 16. They specialised in courses with a bias towards industry and commerce and some of their pupils took the School Certificate exam. These schools endeavoured to find their own premises in Woking, and some managed to keep their integrity until falling numbers and unfilled staff

premises amicably for a while, and laboratories, playing fields, and certain members of staff for the whole of the war, while the sixth formers of the four schools had a joint club, but the evacuated schools longed to re-establish their individual communities in places of their own. This they achieved – Wandsworth Secondary Boys' School and Putney



Scene at Woking Railway Station on 1st September 1939

vacancies led the survivors to amalgamate as The London Central School in 1944.

The boys' and girls' County Schools educated their pupils to School Certificate age, 16, and a few of them to the age of 18. Woking's County schools were mirrored by two evacuated schools and they shared

Girls' County School (always known as Mayfield) both took over large empty houses in 1940. 'We can have our own school belongings once more and have school every day,' wrote Mayfield's head mistress, Agnes Catnach, while Wandsworth's Raymond King was sure 'we are all easier in mind, higher spirited, more

contented and happy', after his school's move.

Though each also set up War-time Classes in London, and though the numbers joining them in Woking dropped year by year, the two schools were still functioning in May 1945. Their examination results suggest that they were able to offer a good education throughout the war. By 1944 a number of pupils were going home every weekend, by train or even by bike, and one or two were daily commuters. Miss Catnach and her governors would have moved the whole girls' school back to Putney that year, but bomb damage to the buildings there made that impossible; and the fact that Mayfield was sharing Wandsworth's London premises prevented Mr King from taking his school home.

Education in general in England suffered from the effects of evacuation. Tests given to teenage London schoolchildren in 1943 indicated that on average their educational attainment was retarded by a year, when compared with the results of similar tests from twenty years earlier. A Secondary headmistress elsewhere in Surrey commented after the war, 'Many of our new entrants had been evacuated several times, many had been at home without attending school, many had not had full-time

schooling. All had suffered from lack of simple tools, e.g. writing with pens.' Numbers of young people left school to go into work as soon as they legally could, instead of staying on to work for their School Certificate exams. Miss Catnach told her governors in 1944 that 'evacuation was beginning to have a decidedly deleterious effect upon the school; continued dependence upon the kindness of strangers was making the older girls, especially, cynical and distrustful of life.' Mr King regarded Wandsworth's six years of evacuation as 'the years that the locust has eaten'.

However, when the war in Europe ended, there were still several evacuated schools in Woking. At the end of the summer term Surrey Education Committee minuted rather grimly that the main body of children were now returning - 'those who have a home able and ready to receive them'. Among these, Mayfield's girls joined Woking County girls at a thanksgiving service in Christ Church and the school presented Woking Council with a commemorative tablet, while Wandsworth remembered their friendly relations with Woking County Boys' School by the gift of a swimming cup.

Jan Mihell

Byfleet in the Second World War

In many respects, Byfleet was probably little different from other villages in the south of England. Early in 1939, Woking Urban District Council discussed the provision of air-raid shelters. Councillor W G Tarrant, the well-known local Byfleet-based housebuilder, wrote to the Council suggesting that a shelter be provided under the proposed new cinema which was planned to be built in the village. Whilst the Council "appreciated the offer of assistance", it stated that it had already made adequate provision for a shelter "underneath the proposed new fire station in the village". Subsequently the Council published plans for the digging of trenches as temporary shelter for up to 450 persons in six village locations, including one for 50 people under the new fire station. In the event, neither the cinema nor a new fire station were built. A small room was built to the rear of the existing fire station to be used as a mess room for firefighters when on duty.

Air-raid shelters were constructed in many private gardens throughout the village; some of these still existed into the 21st century, and there are still a few to be found today.

Two types of shelter were constructed at various locations

depending on the builder and the number of people likely to use them.

Type one had more headroom and an integrated blast wall, plus a bar at the opposite end to the entrance door to allow for an escape by easing out the bricks. The width did not vary much, but the length of some varied up to two times the width - probably the maximum for the reinforcing steel in the concrete roof slab. Each shelter had a ventilation grille at high level above the escape bar.

Type two was constructed using far less bricks and had a free-standing blast wall. The height of the wall was too low for an adult to stand at the side. Some of the access doors were slatted, while others were solid tongue-and-groove, possibly to release blast pressure or for better ventilation, given the lack of grilles in the walls. This construction type varied in length for the estimated number of people using it, but did not have the limitation of restricted roof support reinforcement.

Given the proximity of Byfleet to London, about 25 miles distant, it seems surprising that some children from the capital were evacuated to the village. Early in the war, Canadian troops were billeted in the village, mainly at the Manor House, the Mill House and the Clock House. One local resident recalls that one room on the top floor of the Clock House was

converted into a cell for miscreant soldiers. It appears that officers were billeted in West Byfleet, and the lower ranks in Byfleet. Those staying at the Mill House used some statuary for target practice, destroying some that had been gifted to John Holroyd's family, following his bravery at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, in 1800, when he averted an assassination attempt on King George III.

In 1940, Highfield House, West Byfleet, which had served as a sick bay for evacuated London children, became a home for expectant mothers who had been evacuated from the South-East Coast. In the same year, Councillor Tarrant was awarded the contract of almost £375 to provide three public shelters for 25 people in Oyster Lane and the High Road, with a 50-person shelter at Plough Corner, including a sum of £8.11s [£8.55] for seating. Another company, E & L Berg, was awarded contracts for the construction of domestic shelters in Byfleet, and in Woking.

At the same time, the Rector, the Rev Callender Wake, offered the Council three-and-a-half acres at Rectory Lane for £5 per annum as wartime allotments. The Council anticipated that the military authorities would requisition the recreation ground, but in the meantime they accepted an

offer made by Councillor Lloyd Derisley (one of Byfleet's butchers) to pay the council 10 shillings a week to graze his sheep on the ground until such time as the land was required.

During the war, there was spasmodic bomb damage to properties in Byfleet, but by far the most serious incident occurred in September 1940, when 20 Messerschmidt bombers flew over Brooklands and bombed the aircraft factories. The casualty figures might have been much greater had the raid not taken place at lunchtime, when many workers had gone home, and others were taking their break outside the factory buildings. Nevertheless a total of 83 employees were killed amongst about 700 casualties. Three of those killed are buried in St Mary's Churchyard, but the remainder were buried in a mass grave at Burvale Cemetery, Hersham. During and after the First World War, when there were flying schools at Brooklands, some trainees were German, and it is believed that some of them therefore knew their target on this occasion.

There were two tragedies involving military vehicles. In 1940, a young Byfleet motorcyclist, aged 19, lost his life in a collision with an Army lorry, apparently because he did not see a 'turn right' signal in time, outside Broadoaks, West Byfleet.

In 1942, a 59-year-old woman was crushed to death at Plough Corner, Byfleet, by an Army Bren gun carrier, which suddenly mounted the footpath, and she was pinned against the wall of the 'Plough' public house. The driver was a Coldstream Guardsman, under driving instruction.

During the war, military vehicles passed through the village. One such convoy, probably prior to D-Day, reportedly lasted for two days, during which time children living north of the High Road, were told not to attend school. Many of the vehicles displayed a large white star on their sides and top surfaces; these were driven by Canadian troops.

There was a branch of OCTU (Officer Cadet Training Unit) which had its headquarters at the Manor House, shared with various regiments as they passed through; these were mainly Guards regiments and finally a Canadian Unit. The pre-OCTU unit was known unofficially as the 'Army Roughriding School'.

At a meeting of Woking Urban District Council in 1942, Councillor Cawsey suggested the establishment of a British Restaurant in Byfleet, supported by many local firms. The proposal was subsequently submitted to the Ministry of Food, and the facility was to be open to everybody,

including those who could not go to their works' canteens. The following year, the Ministry of Food agreed to the establishment of such a restaurant at Byfleet. This facility was accommodated in the Village Hall.

Many Byfleet men went to war, and the Village War Memorial records the



Byfleet War Memorial commemorating the 75th anniversary of VE Day

14 names of those killed in action, including the names of those from Byfleet killed in the Brooklands bombing raid. For those men not eligible to fight, a Home Guard section was formed. A familiar sight around the village were the barrage balloons.

Jim Allen, BEM
Chairman Byfleet Heritage Society

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Woking and Stalingrad re-visited

Rosemary wrote an article in the Society's 'Newsletter', no 183 (Dec 2001) describing the efforts Woking made to support the reconstruction of Stalingrad (now Volgograd) Hospital during World War 2. This was prompted by the donation to The Lightbox (then The Galleries) that year of the Beatrice Thompson cup for the best allotment kept by a lady. It was won by the 73 year-old Mrs Edith Smithers of Chertsey Road, Byfleet, and came with a cutting from a local paper dated 22 October 1943 saying that fruit and vegetables from a produce show at which the cup was awarded had been sold to raise money for the Woking Ward in Stalingrad Hospital.

The driving force behind the fund-raising efforts in Woking was the Anglo-Russian Friendship Committee being mooted in a letter to the *News and Mail* of 5 Jan 1942 by Mr B.G. Ralph-Brown, its Chairman, and also Chairman of Woking Ratepayers' Association, President of the Woking Allotments Association, and later a councillor for Chertsey Road Ward, along with Mrs Rhoda McGaw, then secretary of the Woking branch of the Communist Party and also later a councillor for Chertsey Road Ward. It stated that the committee was outside the domain of any political party and hoped to receive co-

operation from them all, and would, with the support of the Council, be holding an Anglo-Russian Friendship Week from 14th to 21st March. This was widely advertised and included talks, plays, concerts and a dancing display. The earlier article details all the events and fund-raising which took place over the next few years, raising about £2000 which helped to finance a Woking ward and the purchase of surgical instruments which were still in use up to a few years ago. Mrs Churchill headed the national 'Aid to Russia Fund' and visited Stalingrad in that capacity. She also visited Woking to receive gifts and Ann Harington remembers presenting a purse to her on a visit to Woking which may have been destined there.

The availability of so many local newspapers online in the British Newspaper Archive (BNA) shows that such activities took place throughout the country, especially in parts with strong working-class traditions, so Woking is unusual in that respect, but we find that the BNA has not added any new references for Woking. The lavish volumes in the British Library record 307 towns and villages which contributed, each commemorated in Russian and English with the nature on their gifts on a page of high quality paper – each page can be accessed via

<https://stalingrad-uk.com/database/> Meanwhile, however, links on the web from 2006 took us to the activities of Dmitry Belov, then scientific assistant of the project 'Museum-Panorama "Battle of Stalingrad"' (<https://stalingrad-battle.ru/>) who became the vigorous force behind the 'International Charitable Fund "The Battle of Stalingrad"' with whom we corresponded by e-mail over the following years, trying to discover links between Croydon and Stalingrad, the possibility of Soviet pilots being trained at Croydon Airport (we found nothing on this) and copying to him some data from the National Archives on discussions about and provision of materials to Russia during the war – with considerable tact the British government had often to point out at the UK was also short of materials to provide all the Russian needs.

In 2010 as our first heritage display at The Lightbox we mounted a display focussing on the cup and its background, and in that year Dr Belov had hoped to visit the UK but funds did not permit. However, towards the end of last year he re-emerged with fully-fledged plans for a display first at the Russian Cultural Centre in London, then a month at St Albans Museum, with plans, now frustrated, of going on to Coventry, a hero city of World War 2 almost on a par with

Stalingrad. We were invited to the launches in both London and St Albans, and on 29 February, facing the trials of track works en route to St Albans we reached the display there and at last met Dr Belov. Why St Albans? It transpired that Graham Kentsley, an entrepreneur from that city had been involved for many years in assisting the authorities in Volgograd with setting up telecommunications systems and had made many contacts there. The display, pictured on page 24, was in the former court house which had been converted to being the city museum only last year, and consisted entirely of photographic panels, and also had a useful booklet in English and Russian depicting the panels. The Museum, when it re-opens after the current crisis, has a feature of a visit to the cells beneath the court room, and temporary displays, the one then showing was of St Albans scientific links from Francis Bacon to Stephen Hawking, although most of the riches of the city's history could be found in the Verulamium Museum and St Albans Abbey. Stalingrad links regardless, St Albans is a fascinating city to visit and a pleasant destination for our last trip before the period of isolation began.

Richard & Rosemary Christophers

Stay at home research

We have been asked to indicate some of the resources which can be used while we are confined to our homes and our computers during lockdown. And don't forget that during daily exercise there may also be the opportunity to photograph or film some of the sights on your walks – some may at present be in settings we have not seen before and may not see again for some time.

The National Archives has sent through a helpful e-mail detailing some resources which could be used while we are all without live libraries. It starts: “The perfect #StayAtHome hobby, With more time on our hands than ever, now is the perfect opportunity to start researching your ancestors and tracing that family tree. We recommend starting with our [research guides](#) to learn how to find and use military records, [wills](#), [the census](#) and a wide range of other records. Need some help? Why not try our [live chat service](#). You can reach our advisers from Tuesday to Saturday, 9:00-17:00”

If you check out The National Archives website <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/> the words underlined above will lead to a multitude of useful guides and sometimes even to the records

themselves. During the present crisis all records which have been digitised and normally involve a charge to look at are available free of charge – lots of early wills, for instance. It is necessary to register (free of charge) for this service, and it is not necessary to hold a National Archives reader's ticket for this. The archives also have a selection of on-line exhibitions, learning resources for children, and a section entitled 'Boredom Busters' for activities for young and old. There is also an online webinar (yes – we know that is a nasty word, but it means web seminar) on family history on 2nd June, which requires registration.

The Surrey History Centre is similarly hosting many activities on-line, and besides their basic website their site 'Exploring Surrey's Past' hosts another set of 'bust the boredom' activities both educational and entertaining for schools, other youngsters, and those of more mature years. A subset 'Treasure Jam' highlights objects in the History Centre collections and elsewhere in the county, and offers the opportunity for endless searches at the click of a mouse. Most importantly the History Centre has initiated a project in which people, young and old, are invited to record in words or images their experiences and feelings of living through the experience of a country, and even a

world, affected by Covid-19. Details at <https://www.exploringsurreypast.org.uk/share-your-experiences-of-life-during-shutdown/> Julian Pooley has a ten-minute talk on Radio Woking on the History Centre under lockdown, mentioned on that web page.

To this we can add the resources which are available to Surrey County Library card holders in the Online reference shelf, website <https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/libraries/learning-and-research/adult-online-reference-shelf>. This includes 'The Times', 19th Century newspapers, 'Oxford Dictionary of National Biography', 'Who was who' and 'Who's who', among other databases. Ancestry, and the British Newspaper Archive were only available in the libraries, now closed, so have to be paid for, but Beta Family Search just requires free registration, and although US centred is a partly adequate substitute for Ancestry (both are run by the same people). FindMyPast is normally only available in libraries, but for the duration is available free at home to Surrey Library ticket holders, who have to register via the Online reference shelf. This has proved popular and Surrey readers used up the monthly quota of searches allocated by FindMyPast well before the end of April.

The catalogues of the Surrey History Centre and Surrey Archaeological Society are also available online and free, but you can, of course, only get descriptions of the items rather than the actual texts. The Historical Directories site run by Leicester University has a lot of content, but is rather difficult to use. The National Library of Scotland has most 25" to the mile Ordnance Survey maps online free. Don't forget general use of Google, which has a lot on current property sales and businesses but more if you persevere.

The Lightbox has a series of blogs which are added to daily, including suggestions for art and craft activities for all ages, a photographic competition, meditations on well known works of art, a discussion of some of the items in The Lightbox, and blogs on heritage topics linked to The Lightbox.

Perhaps a final word, and a word of warning, is in the title of this post <https://www.exploringsurreypast.org.uk/bored-bewildered-exhausted-by-online-browsing/> - it does of course lead to more online browsing but is a reminder that there is even now life beyond the computer, or TV screen.

Richard & Rosemary Christophers

‘Yes, we have no bananas’ – wartime memories of Neil Burnett

I was born at home in Sandy Lane, Maybury in the afternoon of Friday 7th June 1940. My brother David told me that I was delivered by Sister Jack from Woking Maternity Hospital. The hospital was in a house called Wynberg in Oriental Road, opened in 1921.

I was a very ill baby and spent a long time on 'E' ward of Woking War Hospital housed in the Railway Orphanage in Oriental Road. The orphanage children had been moved further down into the country. The

telephone line to the hospital. Mr Evershed was the Principal of the Home and he was retained as steward of the hospital (SHC CC707/21/15/1 Woking War Hospital Sub Committee Signed Minute Book 1940 – 1945). Before the war, it was the home of Dr Humphrey D. Gardner.

In November 1942, my parents received a 'Notice of Serious Illness' for me from the war hospital. It seems I had scarlet fever and was lucky to survive! That was before the NHS was founded and my father had to pay maintenance for me. What must have been one of many bills is



Railway Orphanage – ‘Courtesy of The Lightbox’

hospital was run by St Thomas' Hospital which had moved out of London to escape the Blitz. The Nurses' Home was in a house called Maybury Wood, The Ridge, off Maybury Hill. It accommodated twenty nurses and had a direct

dated 31st December 1941, it states '12 2/7 weeks @ 14s 6d total £8.18.2. Prescriptions had also to be paid for. One for 'Baby Burnett' is dated 31st August 1940 and was written by Dr W.B Smellie (a good name for a doctor!) of Sherwood, Guildford

Road. At that time, Guildford Road was lined by large Victorian houses. Most were replaced by maisonettes in the 1970s. The only one now surviving is The Retreat, the BUPA dental surgery, built in 1887 by Henry Ingram & Son. They became better known as Funeral Directors and became part of Woking Funeral Services.

My earliest memory is from my time in the war hospital. From my ward window I watched a football match on the adjoining playing field. For years I thought I had been in the Woking Victoria Hospital by the canal on the corner of Chobham Road, and couldn't understand how I could see a football match when there wasn't a playing field there!

At home during the air raids, my mother and I crouched in the cupboard under the stairs & father drilled three holes in the door so we had plenty of air. He stood at the front door with the light out watching for enemy planes. I remember him saying to us once 'no, stay there, he is still flying around'.

Father worked at the sorting office and volunteered for 'spotting duties'. When the air raid siren sounded, he went up to the roof while everyone else went down to the basement. When it was safe, he rang a bell in the basement by pressing a button.

One night, he said the superintendent was impatient and came up to get him to press the bell. Father said 'no, the bombers are still around', and with that, a bomb exploded in Old Woking!

I slept in the small back bedroom. Every night father said goodnight and put a night light on the floor by the bed. He always said 'you are a lucky little boy to have a bed to sleep in. Many little boys and girls don't have a bed to sleep in tonight'. At the time, I didn't know how true that was! I obviously associated bangs with exploding German bombs because one night there had been a thunderstorm and next morning at breakfast I said 'those xxxxxx Germans!' I learned to swear in hospital! We kept chickens at the bottom of the garden, Hetty and Betty, names from the radio I think. We also had a lodger, John, who said he would buy a spade and fork to help in the garden. He actually bought a shovel and fork used for building work! I still use them.

During the night early in 1941, a high explosive bomb fell in Sandy Lane in the kitchen garden of a large Victorian house called Westerfolds, opposite the chapel of St Peter's Home. Some of the stained glass windows were blown in and they were then all removed for safe keeping. My other brother Ian said

the crater was very wide and he had to walk carefully round it to get to school.

David worked at the Orchard Garage in College Road until he went into the army, REME, in 1943. He came home for lunch one day, on his way back, he said people were lining College Road waiting for something. Eventually the Royal car came along with the Queen who waved to the crowd. The car turned in to Mayhurst in East Hill which was used as a training school for NAAFI officers. Mayhurst and Westerfolds were bought by A & J Simmons of Old Woking who in the mid 1950s built bungalows on the land. Mayhurst survived into the 1990s as a retirement home before redevelopment. Westerfolds is now flats.

David also recalled that Mrs Bell came to the garage to phone Portsmouth to see if her husband's ship was in port. If it was, David had to go back to the house in Pembroke Road to service the car for her to drive down to collect the Captain. Captain Bell was the Captain of the HMS Exeter at the Battle of the River Plate in December 1939. He and his crew opened the attack on the German Battleship Graf Spee. The Graf Spee was trapped in Montevideo harbour and blown up by the Captain Hans Langsdorff. Langsdorff later shot himself.

A story David told was of someone who seems to have been an early Corporal Jones of Dad's Army. Colonel Southam lived at a house called Loxley, Maybury Hill. He stood at his gate and said to David 'wait till the Germans get a taste of British steel, they won't like that!'

I just remember the wartime song 'yes, we have no bananas', and a story to go with it! The Charman family sold fruit and vegetables and had shops in Woking. They also went round selling from a lorry. It had a roof and back board with side curtains and chains. Sandy Lane was rutted and full of mud and puddles in winter. In summer the sandy soil was dried and bleached white by the sun into a fine powder. Many times near the end of the war I watched Charman's lorry bounce over the ruts, chains clanking, sending up clouds of dust. Through the haze on the backboard was this strange shape that puzzled me as to what it was. One day I was having tea with Marjory Kelly, who lived two doors away, when mother came in she gave us each a curved yellow thing. 'What are they?' we asked. 'Bananas,' mother said. They were so good we asked for another one, but they were still too scarce.

Neil Burnett

Wartime Memories

Wartime service meant different things to different people as the next three articles from WHS members show!

Uncle George's Guide To Free Travel In WWII London

When some people talk of their WWII experience I'm reminded of a wonderful line from the novel 'Creation' by Gore Vidal, set in Greece and Persia, in the year B.C. 445: "All over Greece, strangers of a certain age will greet one another with the question, 'Where were you and what did you do [at the Battle of] Marathon?' Then they exchange lies."

I was born seven years after WWII, and neither my dad, nor his five brothers ever made any pretence of heroism or derring-do. They definitely adhered to that fine old North London working class tradition of only doing anything you were told to do when you could no longer avoid it. Not exactly shirkers and evaders, but there were certainly no volunteers for armed service amongst my uncles. You'd get the call-up if they want you – no point looking for trouble, is there? So, one by one, they got called up. Nobody complained. Nobody did cartwheels of joy either.

During those interminable (to a child) Boxing Day and Easter holiday family gatherings throughout the 50s and 60s – small, smoke-filled living rooms, packed to the gunnels with old, grey men and women – the child you were was only dimly aware of what was talked about by the grown-ups. War reminiscences often cropped up but when they did I mainly recall a sense of fatalistic making-do in the midst of an overarching boredom and hard grind, interspersed with bombings, dislocation, and general inconvenience.

That said, my child's ears picked up on one story my Uncle George related, which I'll present in something like his own words:

"I'd gone into my Staff Sergeant's office and he weren't there. But on his desk there was this whole pile of blank travel warrant cards [servicemen could travel free on public transport, in the line of normal duty requirements]. Well I thought, there's that many here, he won't miss a few will he? So I grabbed a load, scrawled something in all the authorisation boxes, flogged a few round my unit and kept most for myself. In the next couple of years I never paid once on the bus or tube. The one spot of bother I had was one day on the bus to Wood Green, and this MP (Military Policeman) got on. I showed him my card, he looks at it

and says, 'Who's this authorising officer that's signed it? I can't make it out.' For a minute I thought I was in dead schtook, but what I said to him was, 'To be honest I don't really know. The thing is he's one of them new Polish officers that's come over here, and he's got one of them funny long foreign names . . .' Anyway, this MP looks at me and he says, 'Oh yeah, know what you mean. We've got a couple of them in our lot.'

That was a close one, but I got out of it, didn't I!"

That sort of thing was my personal 'Boys' Own Guide to WWII' – Just trying to stay alive, get by, and maybe make a couple of bob where you can.

Around the same period I would've been devouring 'Captain Hurricane' and his like in the 'Valiant' comic, and happily applauding his single-handed demolitions of entire German Panzer Divisions every week! But I don't recall experiencing any disconnect between these and the sorts of real-life narratives I was picking up from my dad, Uncle George and the other grown-ups in my young life. Was I a wise and discriminating child? I don't know, but I'm grateful I've grown-up without having bought into any fantasies about British 'exceptionalism' and/or invincibility. The ghost of Uncle George has made sure of that!

Of course things aren't as black and white as I've just painted them. Dunkirk and the D-Day landings needed heroism on a personal and industrial scale. But people aren't 2-dimensional heroes or cowards. On different days and in different situations they might be either, and everything else in-between. My Uncle George was not one of the thousands involved in these heroic enterprises. Had he been so, I'm sure he'd have shown the courage they all did. And I'm equally sure that he was very glad and relieved to, instead, be riding London Transport free of charge through WWII.

Dick Carpenter

My life in World War II by Thomas Munn (Rosemary Christophers' father)

It all started when I received notice that I was to report to Cardington in Bedfordshire on the 4th July 1940 (American Independence Day) and I was sent a travel warrant and instructions.

Cardington was the home of the R101 Airship and I was one of many who reported on the same day. Here we were given a number (1168727) and enrolled in the RAF. We were issued with uniforms (the first pair of trousers given to me made a perfect Churchill 'V' sign and another pair

suitably altered by the resident tailor was issued).

This was a unit where the initial enrolments were made and within a few days we were put on a train knowing not where we were going.

The train took us to Bridgnorth in Shropshire where we were to spend a short time square bashing and being allocated various jobs round the camp. There I met Sam Costa, a well-known comedian of his day, and Ray Ellington sweeping the corridors of the sick bay. I contracted vaccine fever here and was excused duty for twenty four hours. Having finished our elementary training we we[re] again on the move by train and once more destination unknown. The Royal Air Force command had decided to raise a force to defend the airfields as we were to be the initial force to do this (now the RAF Regiment).

At last we arrived at our destination, Manby in Lincolnshire, a windswept airfield south of Grimsby and west of Cleethorpes. The unit trained air gunners and armourers. When we arrived we were given accommodation in a barrack block with a straw palias [sic palliasse] and two blankets (no bed) and about ten feet wide of floor space. There were no personal weapons available, but there followed a course of training on

how to use the Lewis Gun, a relic from World War I and our job was to defend the airfield from enemy attack (we had a fleet of Blenheim Bombers for training). Later we were issued with Rose Rifles a great heavy contraption which weighed about 10½ lbs. We we[re] allocated gun posts dotted round the airfield and these were manned 24 hours a day seven days a week on a 4 hours on 8 hours off basis. I was paid 12 shillings a fortnight (60p in today's money) & 2 shillings was deducted to cover haircuts, barrack room charges etc. and every three months the unspent monies were refunded to us (a red letter day indeed).

I married on the 16th November 1940 and received a married man's allowance, I think it was 28/6 a week (at present £1.42½ p). Later my wife came and lived in Louth, also in Lincolnshire. I was promoted to LAC (Leading Aircraftman). Later I was sent on a course in the Isle of Man to take further training on the use and maintenance of the Lewis Gun.

Because I passed the course with flying colours I was retained as an Instructor and spent a year in the Isle of Man doing just that. The job had its moments. One pupil shot the tailplane of the training small aircraft. There was something like 300-400 yards between the tailplane and the "Drogue". Each day we travelled

from Douglas to Ronaldsway for the instruction.

At the end of 12 months I was again on the move, this time to Friockheim near Arbroath in Scotland. But the stay was shortlived and no great events took place. Soon there was to be another move this time to Peterhead in the north of Scotland, a cold and unsmiling place where there was only 6 hours of daylight a day and as cold as charity.

After a few weeks I saw that they (the RAF) wanted people to train as Dome teacher Instructors, a new method of teaching Anti Aircraft defence. I was accepted and once again I was on the move. This time to Bovingdon, a US Superfortress base. Imagine my surprise when I met the instructors as they were 2 of my old pupils from the Isle of Man.

Being an American Camp we were on their strength: plenty of butter and goodies of all sorts. Also we drew our quota from the PX (the equivalent of our NAAFI) and could have 200 cigarettes, 5oz of tobacco, 12 bars of chocolate etc. It was terrific. The American Super Fortress crews would not allow us to buy a drink in the local pub. Alas the time spent here was all too short. I passed the course with 98% and then moved on yet again to 13 MU pending the building of the Dome teacher allocated to me. This

was the era of the V1, a deadly weapon indeed. One landed near the WAAF Officers' mess and the five WAAF cooks (because of the explosion) were covered from head to foot in soot and their evening meal which they had just cooked, completely spoilt. Fortunately there were no casualties.

There was nothing exciting except when I volunteered to replace a sergeant named Shoemith as Orderly Sergeant on Christmas Day. He had a big family party lined up and was terribly disappointed when he found out that he was to be Orderly Sergeant.

My next move was to Filey where Butlin's Camp had been constructed before the war and which was now an RAF unit. The Dome teacher was a success, and my staff who were trained projectionists operated the cinema equipment in order to show films for the camp staff.

With the war reaching its climax the Dome teachers were closed down and I was again moved, this time to Molesworth, a conversion unit for jet aircraft.

At this unit there was an SOS for personnel who had had accounting experience and my name was put forward by one of my colleagues (I had had almost 10 years in the

employ of a firm of accountants in Hastings). I reported to the Chief Accountant Officer, who was very pleased to learn that I was so experienced. I also acted as the Welfare Officer for the unit.

I was given the Sergeants' Mess financial accounts but as I did the Officers' Mess records I took on these accounts as well. I bought a bottle of branded whisky a month at their cost price, took it home on leave and sold at a nice profit. Molesworth was reduced in size and I was moved once again (and my final move) to a new unit near Grantham where airmen awaiting demobilization were gathered together and my job was to prepare all their demobilization papers (quite a task). I was working about 14 hours a day seven days a week and was completing 150 sets a day.

My demobilization (number 25) came up and on the 12th November 1945 I said goodbye to the RAF and then reported to Uxbridge for my final adieu. Three weeks later I was back in Civvy Street.

'Tell them you know Morse code'

I found out about my father's wartime experience when the 60th anniversary of D Day was approaching in 2004. The British Legion in the small town where he

lived asked all veterans to write their story. I sat him down, made him talk, then wrote it down. I asked myself why I didn't already know this, but like most of those involved in war, he only spoke of it to his comrades who were 'there'. At the age of very nearly 100, he is the only one left.

A quiet, easy-going man, he was called up, aged 20, at the end of 1940. He wanted to go into the Navy, but they were 'full up' so he opted for the RAF instead. Fate played a hand as when he went for his medical, the first person he saw was a corporal who used to work for his father. The corporal said 'tell them you know Morse code, it's a cushy number'. He did, and ended up a wireless operator instead of a rear gunner!

A keen (and talented) sportsman, he admitted that the first couple of years were 'a cushy number' as, after training, he was sent to RAF Stations where they wanted a good footballer for the team, and on one occasion because they wanted someone to start up a cricket team.

Things escalated early in 1944 when he was transferred to RAF Dundonald on the Clyde where he became part of the 516 Combined Operations Squadron. Dundonald was used for exercises in advance of the Normandy landing on June 6th 1944. In the spring of 1944 he was posted,

as part of the Signals Staff, to an RAF unit aboard HMS Hilary, a Landing Ship HQ with Combined Services personnel. The ship was anchored in the Solent throughout April and May but by the end of May, the ship was sealed and transmissions ceased as decoy stations were opened and shipping began to fill the Solent. HMS Hilary, Flagship of J force, sailed through the night of June 5th to be in position off the Normandy coast, and by dawn on June 6th, they were stationed off Juno Beach where they remained for the next 24 days.

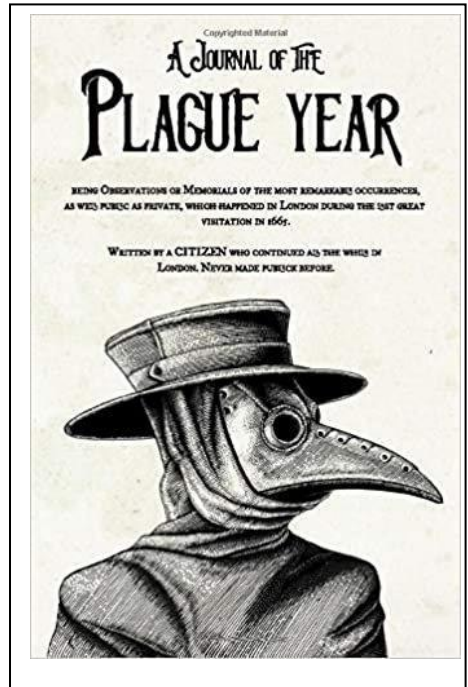
Dad must have been good at his job as he opened up the first watch at 6am on June 6th. The flow of signals was so great that radio operators worked in 2 hour watches instead of the usual 4. He remembered that *'at the end of the first watch, I was relieved, and made my way to the Mess Deck where I had a quick breakfast whilst listening to the Ship's Broadcast System which was tuned in to the BBC news. They announced that the Allied Forces were landing on the Normandy coast. This was happening all around us, and my thoughts were for mum and the people back home who would now have some idea of where we were and what we were doing.'*

After the small group of RAF signals staff left the HMS Hilary on June 30th 1944, the 'bosses' didn't know what

to do with them, so after home leave, they were allowed to choose where they went next. Dad chose to go to a Direction Finding Station near Swansea where he remained until he was issued with tropical gear and sent to join another HQ ship bound for the Far East. Thereby hangs another tale..... (to be continued)

Helen Gristwood

Snippets from 'Journal of the Plague Year, written by a citizen who continued all the while in London' by Daniel Defoe, 1722.



The year in question was 1664/1665. Daniel Defoe wrote this as a novel,

but based it on the journal an unnamed person, possibly his uncle, who had the initials H.F.

These are excerpts from '*Orders conceived and published by the Lord Mayor and Aldermen of the City of London concerning the infection of the plague, 1665*' There are many pages of them, these being but a small selection! It is amazing that so many of them mirror today's injunctions.

-o O o-

'All plays, bear baitings, games, singing of ballads, buckler-play, or such-like causes of assemblies of people be utterly prohibited, and the parties offending severely punished by every alderman in his ward.'

-o O o-

'All public feasting, and particularly by companies of this city, and dinners at taverns, ale-houses, and other places of common entertainment, be foreborne till further order and allowance; and that money thereby spared be preserved and employed for the benefit and relief of the poor visited with the infection'.

-o O o-

'That disorderly tipping in taverns, ale-houses, coffee houses, and cellars be severely looked unto, as the common sin of this time and greatest occasion of dispersing the plague'.

-o O o-

'That care be taken of hackney-coachmen, that they may not (as some of them have been observed to do after carrying infected persons to the pest house and other places) be admitted to common use till their coaches be well aired, and have stood unemployed by the space of five or six days after such service'.

-o O o-

'The richer sort of people, especially the nobility and gentry from the west part of town, thronged out of town with their families and servants...all hurrying away'.

-o O o-

'All public assemblies at burials are to be foreborne during the continuance of this visitation'.

-o O o-

'I think it ought to be recorded to the honour of such men, as well clergy as physicians, surgeons, apothecaries, magistrates, and officers of every kind, as also all useful people who ventured their lives in discharge of their duty, as most certainly all such as stayed did to the last degree; and several of all these kinds did not only venture but lose their lives on that sad occasion'.

-o O o-

The final few lines of the book:

*'A dreadful plague in London was
in the year sixty five,*

*Which swept an hundred thousand souls
away, yet I alive.'*

H F



Rosemary and Richard Christophers in Surrey Life (May 2020)
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Panels at the Stalingrad in British History display at St Albans