

POTTON HISTORY SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER

SPECIAL EDITION

TO COMMEMORATE THE OUTBREAK OF WORLD
WAR 11 SEPTEMBER 3RD 1939

MEMORIES OF POTTON AND POTTONIANS



EDITOR : ANITA LEWIS

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Editorial

Fifty years ago on Sunday September 3rd the Second World War broke out. There was a week of waiting for the inevitable, the end of a long and uneasy period that had lasted since 1933 when the Nazis took power and began one act of aggression after another in Europe. In 1939 Britain's Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, to be condemned by history as an appeaser, met Hitler in Munich and returned with an agreement that was not worth the paper it was written on. He told the nation: "I believe it is peace in our time." Hitler, hell bent on world domination, continued his demands and a confrontation became unavoidable.

The Government presented Hitler with a final ultimatum. Unless they received a reply by 11 a.m. with an undertaking that Germany would withdraw its troops from Poland, a state of war would exist between the two countries. People stayed near their radios until a programme offering handy tips for making meals out of tinned soup was interrupted and listeners were told to stand by for an important announcement. At 11.15 a.m. Neville Chamberlain the P.M. told the nation's 46 million citizens that they were now at war with Germany.

Within minutes the air raid sirens of London sounded.

The Army and reserves numbered 400,000 with an equal number of Territorials. The The Nation of Services (Armed Forces) Act came into force making all men between 18 and 41 liable to conscription. A War Cabinet was formed it included Winston Churchill.

At 6 p.m. the King broadcast a message from his study in Buckingham Palace. He had great difficulty in public speaking and hearts went out to him as he fought to conquer a stammer to say "For the sake of all that we hold dear, and of the world's order and peace, it is unthinkable that we should refuse to meet the challenge with God's help we shall prevail".

It was decided to send a full copy of his speech to Britain's 15 million households. On the wireless J.B. Priestley read from his Let the People Sing; there was a service, music and as ever Sandy Macpherson played the organ to an excited but subdued Great Britain.

1939-1945 By Ann Barker (Nee Markman)

I was five in May 1939. The following August, presumably as a prelude to starting school, I was taken for my first holiday stay at the sea-side to Clacton. Before that we had only had day trips. I think we came back early but I know we were back home at 71 Horslow Street for September 3rd on which day our neighbour had a baby. Therefore in my mind these things as inextricately interwoven - Clacton, Declaration of War, next door's baby and starting school.

It must have been some before this that we had collected our gas masks from, I believe Mr. O. Bartle's old shop, which is now the site of the office of Lloyds Bank in the Market Square. I had a proper one but was secretly envious of the Mickey Mouse ones given to younger children. The pain of being too old at five! Also briefly in the 1939/1940 period we had two evacuees called Sylvia and Dorothy Ledwith. They came as two frightened and "different" London girls who just as quickly vanished back to London but not quite without trace. Much later probably in the late 1970's a middle aged lady knocked on my mother's door and said "Remember me" - it was one of the Ledwith girls on a nostalgia trip.

School was a new experience for me anyway so the classroom effect of London children was all part of the new way of life. Around this time the nurse discovered head lice at school which necessitated treatment with an evil smelling brown shampoo and combing with a fine-toothed comb. The names of two of the boys labelled just "evacuee" on the photograph of my class in the History Society's collection I remember to be John Potts and Eric FitzJohn. I suspect they fought with the local boys but in those days the girls' and boys' playgrounds were rigidly segregated. The same photograph includes Trevor Chamberlain who grew up to be known as "Tosh" and played soccer for Fulham. Another minor celebrity who spent some time in Potton was Stephanie Voss whose father had a dance band and installed his family in the Rose and Crown while he was stationed locally. After the war she sang professionally with the band. In Potton she had long hair decorated with four white ribbons at a time when my mother insisted that one bow and a side parting was for me!

At about this time the local Home Guard did a demonstration of their skills of camouflage at the Sandy Road Recreation ground by "disappearing" into the hedge which borders the nursery. They were bedecked with greenery and, on command, vanished. Needless to say the local youth claimed to be able to see the men but I could not and was impressed.

My grandfather died in 1940 and my family moved to Brook End. A new venture here was to keep hens. I think they were bought from a place at Waresley and were temporarily housed in the stable while my father organised a henhouse and run. I still recall the thrill of finding our first egg laid in the manger on the first day of ownership in spite of being warned that they would take time to settle. My father left the Home Guard and followed a family tradition by joining the Auxillary Fire Brigade. Teams of firemen used to sleep overnight at the station presumably on a rota basis and to be instantly available.

At Brook End we were next door to the Chequers Pub where the locals began to meet an increasingly mobile population. Potton was already visited by a travelling fair which pitched in the Gas Works field (today's doctors surgery) and gipsy pea-pickers in season. My bedroom was well placed to observe and hear the revels that ready money produced. One young gipsy girl used to stand on a parked lorry and belt out Al Jolson's hit song 'April Showers'. The mushrooming air fields in the district brought new accents into the car park of the pub. One sad visitor Mrs. Snell, the landlady, cared for was a little white dog (a cairn?). It had been rescued from an aircraft which had crashed on its home-ward flight. Did the local firemen bring it back from the crash site?

My mother used to leave my father to baby-sit me and my baby sister, born October 1941, on Monday evenings and this meant I could stay up listening to "Monday Night at Eight". I do not know what meeting kept the ladies out on that evening but I used to rush to bed as I heard her returning footsteps terrified by the voice of Valentine Dyall as The Man in Black. These fears were compounded by the large American lorries which shook our house and rattled our windows as they rumbled down Royston Street on their way to bases in Cambridgeshire. We called these vehicles "humingers". One night after I had gone to bed my father came up to see if I was awake, wrapped me in an eiderdown and took me to the window to watch a "doodle-bug" fly over. Its tail continued to flash so Potton was not its destination.

Five years after starting Potton School new hope was in the air and a new Education Act was passed. I changed schools and began travelling from Potton Station to St. John's Bedford to attend the Bedford Girls' Modern School soon to change its name to the Dame Alice Harpur School for Girls. The local trains were sometimes delayed to allow more urgent ones such as Red Cross or hospital or goods trains to pass through. This meant the novelty of being legitimately (we were nothing if not loyal and patriotic) late for school. On one such occasion the Station master turned a blind eye as we collected coal from the yard and kindled a fire in the waiting room. The room had a splendid round table where we sat playing cards or fortune telling. Shortly after starting school in Bedford Hill Fennemore's father brought us home in his plumber's vehicle and as we came up the hill from Deepdale we saw the wreckage of a crashed plane. In amongst the crumpled metal was an unwound toilet roll - a vivid image.

One final memory of wartime in Potton is of my 11th birthday - 8th May 1945. Mr. Churchill timed the Peace celebrations just right and we had a holiday from school (the French keep this anniversary still, sensible folk!). That evening we danced in the Market Square. I expect that it rained but I do not remember that it did.

World War II Memories By Trevor Ball

My mother and I were at the front door at our house in Beckenham Kent in the early part of 1940 awaiting the milkman.

He had just arrived in his horse drawn milk float at our house when a German bomber flew low over the house tops, firing at profile in the street.

My mother pushed me under the stairs for safety's sake, while the milkman threw himself under the milk float.

To this day I shall never understand why the horse did not bolt, leaving the milkman lying in the road. But it just stood there as if nothing had happened.

While petrol was still available at the beginning of the war, we used to get away from the bombing by going to relations in Kent in my father's Morris Ten fitted with slitted masks over the headlights (a blackout wartime regulation)

One weekend while we were in Kent a bomb fell two doors away from our house in Beckenham.

The Anderson shelter next door in the garden where we normally went during an air raid was destroyed as were windows, ceilings, etc. in our house.

However, the most amazing thing was the garage built of asbestos sheets on a metal frame. The effect of the bomb left the frame intact, but with no sign of any asbestos sheeting, yet the light bulb was still intact!

We also found our garden roller three houses away and the back door at the bottom of the garden.

Having been bombed out of our house in Beckenham, we moved to Turbridge Wells in Kent where we experienced the V1's (doodlebugs). At first we thought they were Red Cross planes, lit up to prevent them being fired at. However we soon learnt what they were when one came down at a nearby golfcourse creating a new tanker!

After that we lived in dread of having the motor stop and waiting for the explosion when it landed - hopefully not too near.

In Kent these V1's were intercepted by fighter planes who tried to tip them off course to land by flicking them with a fighters wing tip. We often used to watch this happening over our house.

My wife remembers as a child preventing her mother trying to retrieve her false teeth which she had left on top of their Morrison shelter while they were sheltering underneath during an air raid. She (my wife) thought that a bomb was bound to hit their house (in Catford) if her mother moved out from under the shelter!

As food was rationed, I remember going out and picking blackberries to be bottled by my mother and rose hips which were sent away to be turned into syrup.

Also being fed poached egg and spinach as it "was good for me" and available. I hate it now!

Some events 1939-45 as remembered by Sidney Emery

and written by Anita Lewis

I was 32 years old when war broke out. I was working at the tannery in Potton and had just been promoted to general foreman responsible for eighty men. My salary was £4.10.00 a week 10/- more than my predecessor.

I did not go to war as mine was a reserved occupation, wool from our tannery being sent to London to make warm jackets for airmen.

Many men in Potton joined the Fire Service which was also a reserved occupation, but many more were called up and had to leave the town.

On Monday September 4th, I walked up Bury Hill from the tannery to my house and the sky was alive with aircraft on exercises - Wellingtons, Hudsons, Stirlings. Generally, however, life was much the same for those lucky enough to remain at home in Potton. Rationing came, but because of our local farms and market gardens, there was little shortage.

We had 3 German prisoners working at the tanyard, they lived at the Manor (other prisoners were at Tetworth or on Mr. Bartle's farm at Hatley Road). Our three were good workmen and we got on well with them. I used to go for their bread ration and their fish. I remember that Ludwig used to like to eat his kippers raw.

I cycled over to Biggleswade and signed to join the navy but the officer told me to go home and wait and perhaps I'd be needed. I didn't hear from the navy so I joined the Home Guard. I was in the 14th Platoon. We were drilled by the regular army at Sutton Park and the Carthegena Sand Pit. We had to know about fire arms and went for training to the firing range at Milbrook. We did plenty of marching and our boss Lieutenant Lucas considered us very smart. One of our duties was to patrol the railway line for two hour stretches. Our territory was from the crossing gates at Sutton Mill Road to the Bridge at Deepdale. We patrolled three of us together, Benny Banker, Albert Griggs and myself. We saw the German aircraft drop bombs at Deepdale aiming for the train. I remember the noise of most of the planes and the sirens. Many of the trains carried ammunition.

Coming home from patrol, we used to sit on the bank and listen to the larks' songs on summer mornings. You don't hear larks like that any more.

We were good riflemen in our patrol, especially Bob Carter. We wore khaki uniforms, split top caps, gaiters and boots.

When the war was over, we had to return our weapons and ammunition to the depot which was where Benny & Clydes hair salon is now. Lance Corporal Theobalds was in charge at the depot. I had a lot to return. There were pill boxes all over Potton e.g. at Bury Hill Cross roads, Potton Church and the Tan Yard.

Spigot mortars were on Gamlingay Road and near Potton Fire Station.

I enjoyed watching Dad's Army on T.V. as it reminded me of those days.

They were good times, you made lots of friends, I was glad to be in the Home Guard and able to stay in Potton. I had to work hard but it kept me fit.

During the Peace Celebrations there was a big bonfire in the Market Square near the Old Shambles, the tan yard hooter blasted off, so did the base hooter at the foundry, flags were flying everywhere but not everyone came home.

Ludwig said he would write when he got home to Germany but he never did. I still hear from Jimmy Kirk who comes from Edinburgh.

The First Great War 1914-18 by Miss D. Kitchener

I was not quite two years old when war broke out in 1914. My memories, therefore, are intermittent, rather like a series of snapshots. My first picture is of a family conclave in our dining room at Lyndevote (2 Chapel Street) when the Army billeting officer and the local police sergeant came, by appointment, with the proposal that we should have the Lieutenant of the Army Unit and his wife billeted on us. There was a lot of talk and I remember getting very sleepy before the matter was concluded but the Lieutenant's wife became seriously ill and the Lieutenant was posted to another Unit and the subject did not arise again.

Aunt Nell was not so lucky and two Tommies were billeted on their top floor. Coming home one night, rather the worse for wear, one was heard repeating Aunt Nell's instructions "Now wipe your feet on the first mat, and wipe them again on the second mat, and then go straight upstairs!" His companion stumbling up the stairs mumbled "Call this a house - its a blooming mansion!"

The arrival of the Australians caused much excitement and many Potton people welcomed into their homes as guests for a meal. I remember one Sunday morning several of them sheltering in the shop doorway opposite and my father called two of them in to share our Sunday dinner. Others used to come in in the evenings for a game of cards - usually race patience or rummy, I believe. Two family connections on my mother's side used to spend their leaves with us. They both enlisted while under age and, like many others, the war seemed, at first, a great adventure. Happily they both survived and kept in touch until they died some years ago. There were tennis parties and dances in the Parish hall and they entered fully into the fun when Thurston's Fair came to the field next to the Gas works. One of them was a crack shot and as he picked off the targets, one by one, he was politely asked to leave. The swinging boats were very popular and as the boys pulled higher and higher the girls squealed half in terror and half in delight, their departure caused a few heartaches but I do not remember any serious problems or attachments, maybe I was too young to know. Uncle Ben was the only other member of the family to enlist in the Yeomanry but mercifully his time in France was short, comparatively. Farming was a reserved occupation and the steam traction engines played a vital role in bringing more land into cultivation. Both George and Henry were over age in any case.

We were once aroused in the middle of the night by George Westrup (Truppy) because a Zeppelin was zooming around overhead and it was feared it had spotted the Foundry. We all crept down by candlelight to the dining-room, where the windows had big wooden shutters, until the danger had passed, and fortified by a cup of tea we returned to our beds. No bombs were dropped in the neighbourhood. Electricity did not come until the 1920s but gas and oil lighting was, of course, blacked out and Special Constables, of whom Uncle Orar was one, regularly tramped round the town to enforce the regulations.

GERMAN PRISONERS

Later a number of German prisoners arrived. They were billeted in the flats in the Market Square (where the new block of flats now stands on the west side) Each morning at 6 a.m. they were marched off to Sutton to saw up trees in a field near the brook and were in the charge of an elderly carpenter, Mr. Webb. I do not think they ever caused any trouble.

PEACE DAY CELEBRATIONS

At last came the Armistice and then the Peace which Potton celebrated with enthusiasm. A grand carnival was organised by Mr. Rangeley, (who held some government appointment and lived in the Hollies, in King Street) and Aunt Nell (Mrs. O. Bartle). Horse-drawn carts with no sides, normally used for transporting vegetables, served as floats and were suitably decorated. The focal point was one labelled "Peace" with Mrs. Alice Capon standing in the centre, in a long white dress with gauze and tinsel wings with her lovely golden hair streaming free and round her feet a cluster of little girls (of whom I was one) dressed as angels. We won first prize and received five shillings each. Mr. Rangeley in Arab costume led the procession on a white horse. In the evening there was dancing on the Market Square with the Town Band. The beds of the German prisoners were burnt on a huge bonfire to the accompaniment of fireworks. I was taken up into the Town Clock room where we had an excellent view of the proceedings and egged on by Jack Dixon threw confetti on the band below!

At some point there was a big Thanksgiving in Church. Representatives of the different organisations assembled in the Market Square and led by the Salvation Army Band and headed by Mr. Braybrooks and my father (Mr. G. Kitchener) the two representatives on the Rural District Council, marched to the Church.

Shortage of the manpower in the Church led to the amalgamation of the benefices of Potton and Cockayne Hatley and the Revd. R.S. Bagshaw became Rector of Cockayne Hatley as well as Vicar of Potton. For the first time women were admitted into the choir at Potton. Mrs. Saunders, Mrs. O. Bartle, Eveline Kitchener, Madge Brown and Eva Arnold are some of the names I remember.

Gladys Kitchener joined Aunt Vie's (Mrs. H. Kitchener) V.A.D.'s and used to cycle to Sandy to help Mrs. Saunders, the doctor's wife, in the kitchen of the Hospital at the Regal Cinema on a rota system. Miss Farley of Sandy Lodge was the Commandant. I do not think that Gladys had much contact with the patients, many of whom were suffering from shellshock but she did sometimes hear sad tales of their ramblings and nightmares.

At first Eveline was still at Crescent House School, Bedford going in daily by train with Doris Marsom. They were often held up by military funerals, when a severe outbreak of measles decimated the Highland Regiment stationed there. She did catch a glimpse of King George and Queen Mary when they visited the troops at Bedford. After she left school she began to teach Joan Bartle and me our first lessons in properly organised sessions with a fixed time table in our dining room. A little later we were joined by Peggy Rangeley and worked happily together until the Rangeleys left Potton and Joan - I gained admission to the High School in 1924.

FOOD

I do not recall any shortage of food except sugar which was rationed and we each had our own brown stone jar for our weekly allowances. One Lent Eveline saved her ration and made some apricot jam with dried apricots but something went wrong and it was a solid glutinous mass quite inedible and a bitter disappointment. No doubt the farms cushioned us against other shortages as we had a weekly supply of 1 lb. of butter, and a score of eggs, with the occasional chicken and a turkey at Christmas and sometimes a pheasant or other game but we did not have an unlimited supply.

ANITA LEWIS

"When the boat comes in"

The sentiments behind this north country folksong have kept the hopes and aspirations of generations alive: but for me, a child in wartime Britain, my boat really did come in".

My father was a regular in the Royal Marines Portsmouth Division even before September 1939 so he was among the first to experience active service. A principal duty of the marines was to protect convoys of ships that had to venture through seas made dangerous by the enemy. My father was away for long periods of time - but he did come home from time to time after a convoy had completed its journey.

It is one of these shore leaves that I remember as if it were yesterday. The detail of his homecoming is lost for me but what he brought for me, was fortune and treasure beyond my wildest dreams. It was a box, a whole box, a whole box of 48 tubes, of 48 tubes of Rowntrees fruit pastilles. He had been to the east coast of the U.S.A.. Words cannot describe the sight of that box; even the corner shop did not have one such as mine. I thought it would never empty and that my tubes of pastilles would last forever. My primary school classmates all came to gaze in wonder and I suppose I have never been so popular. Alas, one day the box was empty, the tubes of pastilles had been consumed, my treasure was gone but how many other wartime children could say that their "boat had come in".

War Time Memories Norman Parry

In the late summer of 1939, as a reward for having obtained a free scholarship to the local grammar school I was taken to Burnham-on-Sea for my first seaside holiday. The week chosen was the last one in August and the return journey had been planned for Saturday 2nd September.

The general mobilisation which took place during that week and uncertainty about availability of trains meant postponing our return until the following Monday. As a result the morning of Sunday 3rd September was spent in the private room of the two ladies who owned the guest house, their radio was of 1920s vintage fitted with two sets of earphones instead of a loudspeaker.

The two people who had the earphones relayed Mr. Chamberlain's announcement to the others in the room, not that it meant much to a ten year old but to the others with memories of the First World War it was something that they dreaded.

At the new school, as elsewhere air raid precautions were taken seriously. The lower corridor of the building was designated a shelter area and portable wooden shutters had been made to cover all areas of glass and two brick built shelters had been provided on the sports field. I don't remember them ever being used for real but as the school was only ten miles from the centre of Birmingham everyone expected the worst. I was probably more at risk cycling the five miles to and from home loaded with school books, gas mask and all the other items that boys cannot do without. The journey on 13th March 1941 was made memorable by a detour to see the remains of a Junkers J488, 71888T which had crashed the previous night, the crew having abandoned the aircraft over Merseyside.

The fields around our village received a considerable number of bombs, fortunately without injury to persons or property, the sites provided many hours of searching for small boys eager to collect souvenirs. Two fins from small incendiary bombs now cleaned and engraved with the date 10th May 1941 are still in the possession of one member of the family.

In response to the Dig for Victory campaign a large area of the school sports field was converted into a vegetable patch and on a number of occasions large numbers of school children would be given leave of absence to help farmers with their harvesting particularly of potatoes which were a labour intensive crop.

It is a wonder we ever learnt anything considering the time spent away from school and the turnover of staff. I remember one Austrian refugee, Mr. Strauss whose English was very poor and who had the unenviable task of teaching us mathematics.

To school boys war was something glamorous, something that made heroes and many longed for the day when they could get into uniform, this attitude was officially encouraged. On a number of occasions ex members of the school returned in uniform to talk about their experiences, it was very rare for anyone to mention the heroes of war the emphasis was always on patriotism and doing ones duty.

Looking back one realises how much of what one heard was propaganda but one thing it did was to engender a togetherness and a willingness to help others a feature sadly lacking in today's society.

In 1939 soon after the start of the war our landlord, Sir George Vernon who owned most of the village committed suicide in rather a messy way. He was believed to have been a supporter of Sir Oswald Moseley's British Fascist party and it was probable that he would have been imprisoned under the 1813 regulations. Because of his dislike of the Church and at his request he was buried in unconsecrated ground in Shawley Woods part of another Vernon property. By a strange coincidence on coming to Potton 33 years later I discovered that an uncle of Sir George (William Shawley Vernon) who had been vicar of Shawley for 42 years in the last century had lived in Potton and is buried in Potton cemetery.



Good Health!

GLAD TO SEE YOU'RE "GETTING ROUND" SO NICELY!

Autumn Programme 1989

September 28th They lived in Gamlingay
Mr. J. Brown

October 26th Street Evening
Horslow St. and Bull St.

November 23rd A.G.M. 7.30 p.m.
Quiz Evening

December 14th Pictorial Entertainment

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