

Wells Local History Group Newsletter



**80th Anniversary of the start of
World War Two**



Number 72 – Autumn 2019

My appeal for articles on the “home front” during WW2 produced far more than I expected! So much so that some of them are having to be held over until the next issue. I also received other items which were not related to that conflict, and these too have been saved for future publication.

As I write this (in mid-July) the big news is that the long-awaited Archive Room has just been completed and is ready for items to be rounded-up from wherever they have been stored over the past few years. We are hoping to have the room open a couple of half-days each week, so that people can come and use the material we have stored. For this we need volunteers, so please let us know if you are able to assist. I attach a few photos of the completed, but as yet empty room.

Keith Leesmith



Wells at war



The Second World War impinged upon the town in a quite different way from the first. The reaction to the news of the declaration was instant if not premature. On

September 1st, 1939 a Food Control Committee was set up. It was realised that following the earlier war, food supply, particularly from across the Atlantic was crucial. Discussions were soon advanced for the handing over of allotment land to local farmers. Restrictions on tenants keeping pigs and poultry were relaxed. A little later tenants of uncultivated land were threatened with the termination of their leases.

The fear of imminent invasion resulted in the setting up of artillery batteries around the coast. Thus, at Egmore the 57th Heavy Newfoundland Regiment of the Royal Artillery moved in setting up two giant 9.2 inch Howitzers of WW1 vintage close to Egmore Farm. The target area for these guns covered sea approaches to Wells and Holkham. Practice firings were terrifying and, because of the risk of blast damage to nearby buildings, were restricted. During one of the few practice firings, a local fishing boat was very nearly hit. After sixteen months the Newfoundlanders left for overseas being replaced by a British army regiment. It was then handed over to the Land Army before becoming a decoy airfield for Docking.

Not everyone was convinced that the war changed everything. When the Ministry of Health wrote postponing all consideration of further house building, Wells Council at first resisted, seeking special permission to build more houses, but it was no good. The opposite proposal, to allow the return of families to houses

condemned as part of the Clearance schemes, was again resisted but it happened anyway.

By January 1940 evacuees had begun to arrive. There were some 144 of them all from a Roman Catholic orphanage in Gravesend. Charles Raven, retired headteacher was given the job of billeting them with local families. Mrs. Dalliston of Clarence House on the Buttlands was not alone in refusing to accept them, some on account of their religion. Some of the children were in poor health. Bed wetting was a problem. Preliminary plans were made for billeting the civil population moving into the area from bombing. The Girl Guides were deployed collecting waste paper; they had collected over five tons of it by May 1940. Trenches and dugouts were to be dug to provide shelter against enemy bombers for those who would not get home fast enough, as if their homes would be proof against high explosives. More effective were the so-called Anderson shelters, named after their designer, which families were encouraged to build in their gardens or outhouses from corrugated iron parts supplied by the council. These they could and did self-build and if sunk into the ground and covered with earth were quite effective. Not a few folk took advantage of the offer. Steel boxes, big enough to put a bed in and called Morrison shelters after the Minister for Home Security could be obtained for installation inside a house. Both were available free to any family earning less than £350 per annum. In addition, a large brick shelter was built on the Buttlands. (Used for illicit assignations by couples, it was not much used for its original purpose and was latterly made into a static water tank for use by the Fire Brigade). Another shelter was built at the Primary school. Gas masks were issued in quantity. School children had regular gas mask practice. No one was sure what to expect, how to protect local people and keep them fed or how to resist an enemy which might invade but how and where no one knew.

The fear of invasion was most acute early on in 1940. Initially, official estimates were that Wells was not a likely invasion point but even so two six-inch naval guns were brought in and set up on the beach, peering over the barbed wire entanglements replete with landmines. Their crews, from the 65th Searchlight Regiment, (Royal Artillery) were billeted in a camp in the Pinewoods. In the event they were not heavily deployed; they requested from the Council a supply of deckchairs for use while not busy practising! For target practice they used a number of



**Building the air raid shelter
on The Buttlands**

target boats which were also based in the harbour. Their air equivalent were the 'Queen Bees', radio controlled modified Tiger Moths, which were launched by catapult from Weybourne and then picked up by a coaster, the Gertruda which was stationed at Wells. Nearby Langham was the base for aircraft towing artillery targets. The regular crump of guns firing at targets from Weybourne, Stiffkey and Wells could be heard for miles.

Wells was in a small way involved in the Dunkirk evacuation in 1940. Lifeboat coxswain Ted Nielsen took a number of vessels from Wells to assist in bringing British servicemen from the French coast. Only one fishing boat from Wells, the Bessie made the crossing, but the Lucy Lavers a lifeboat temporarily based here and now permanently moored in the harbour also made the trip. After the evacuation, Wells was one of the places to which displaced servicemen were sent.



Winston Churchill visiting the Queen Bee launch site – early 1940's

During the air war that followed, numbers of aircrew who had ditched or parachuted into the sea were lost. Of those who were saved, most relied upon the lifeboats, though some were picked up by the four air-sea rescue vessels moored in the harbour. These enabled men to be rescued either from certain death from the cold sea or from drowning. Altogether, over 2000 men were rescued over the course of the war, several of whom came ashore at Wells. One such event took place on May 13th, 1943 when one of the boats picked up an airman in the sea who would undoubtedly otherwise have perished. The rest of the crew had bailed out over land. The lifeboat crew were often put on standby, sleeping in the Lifeboat House when bombing raids were launched from Lincolnshire so as to rescue crews of aircraft unable to make landfall. Nielsen was to receive an award for going aboard a Lancaster, which had crashed into the sea, in search of survivors.

Men left for the forces, some of them having been in responsible positions in the town. Leonard Anderson, the first full-time Medical Officer of Health, joined the RAF. His replacement Dr. Irene Green, the first woman to hold the post, provided detailed accounts of the condition of the town. Her reports show the vanishingly small incidence of maternal mortality, a great change from former times. She also noted the rise in the incidence of tuberculosis. Henry Aldridge,

newly elected chairman of the Council went to become a pilot officer. His post was kept open for him for a year after which James Blades was elected as chairman. (He returned in 1946). The school bade farewell to three members of staff (two of whom returned.). Those who had retired, like Miss Rungary, former primary school head, were found useful employment. She became First Aid Commandant. More than 150 locals put on uniforms from the Home Guard to the Observer Corps, Ambulance Crew and the Auxiliary Fire Service.

The war, of course, brought an end to cross channel traffic and few vessels of any kind used the harbour. The only substantial traffic that the war brought was shipments of cement, some thirty of them, for the runways of the North Creake airfield in 1943. Malting, on the other hand, returned if on a limited scale. R and W. Paul, whose plant in Ipswich had been requisitioned, took over the No. 18 Malting on the Glebe to continue production. Wells' traditional industries associated with grain and flour milling became more important and both Favor Parker and Vynne and Elliot with premises on the quay were required to provide fire watchers to protect them from incendiaries. Tourism, on the other hand, simply died. The town had become increasingly reliant on those who came seeking a holiday. Now it was feared, retailers would no longer be able to pay their rates.

Many elements of the life of the town continued albeit under straitened circumstances. Others were left half-done. The houses in Luggar Yard and its surrounds subject to a slum clearance order were left derelict and half-demolished; grass and weeds grew long in the yards. Some attempt was made to tidy them up and to demolish some of the empty properties. Others were, after some resistance, re-occupied for the duration.

Fishing continued on a limited scale. Many young men had gone away to fight, leaving the fishing to their elders.



The remaining fishermen were able to take advantage of the absence of trawlers to engage in line fishing for white fish which proved highly successful, negotiating their way through the narrow gap in the invasion defences to get out to sea. The beach was otherwise off-limits; the fishermen alone had permits which were inspected by a sentry standing on the beach bank. So, few people saw Mosquito aircraft practising with dummy highball bouncing bombs off Holkham or the movements of military shipping on the horizon.

The beach huts, those that had not been dismantled by their owners at the outbreak of war, were confiscated or, left untended, lost their roofs and doors in storms and filled with sand. Unexploded ordnance became a temptation to young children, some of whom, too adventurous for their own good, slipped through the barriers onto the marshes. The more adventurous were lucky to escape with their lives. Not everyone was so lucky. In the early days of the war the beach had been mined against invasion. As that danger receded, instructions were given to remove the mines but, the maps indicating their whereabouts having been lost the Royal Engineers Bomb

Disposal unit was given the task of searching for them. Two men, Corporal Amos Henshall and Sapper Josiah Potter, were blown up on Holkham beach on separate occasions in December 1944 by these mines.

Perhaps because of the number of airfields, North Norfolk suffered several air raids. Incendiary bombs fell harmlessly around the town in August 1942. A year later, on August 18th.1943, the harbour was brought to a standstill by a raid deploying so-called butterfly (antipersonnel) bombs. A team led by Captain Edward Bourne detonated thirty-one of these particularly unpleasant devices, doubtless saving the lives of those who might be attracted by their brightly painted colours. Bourne was awarded the George Medal. His sergeant Fred Fisher was awarded the B.E.M. Bourne was not the only man to be decorated.

Frank Taylor, whelk fisherman from early years, joined up and was awarded the D.S.M. for his exploits with the Naval Intelligence Department, landing French resistance fighters in occupied France; on one occasion, escaping capture he had to be smuggled back to England via Algeria. (After the war, he first served as a Trinity House pilot in Wells for five years; then in 1956 he became Harbour master and second lifeboat coxswain – in which capacity he was awarded a Bronze medal.)



Frank Taylor B.E.M

He retired in 1974. Charlie Platten got the D.C.M after having walked 250 miles across the Libyan Desert dressed as an Arab observing enemy positions; Billy Butters got the M.M, as did Robert Churchill; William Deeks got the D.F.C.; Graham Cawdron got the D.F.M; Robert Turner Cain got the DSO; Margaret Flint who joined the A.T.S. at the age of 18 was made sergeant in charge of a platoon of drivers and vehicles and

employed by Royal Engineers Eastern Command in charge of invasion defences; she was awarded the B.E.M. Others were mentioned in despatches. Thirty-three men of the town died including Ted Nielson's son, Theodore. Three were buried by the Burma railway; six died in the navy. David Coke, second son of the Earl also died. Shot down over Libya in 1941 having survived the Battle of Britain, he was awarded a posthumous D.F.C.

Airfields proliferated all around: Docking, Raynham, Sculthorpe, Langham and eventually North Creak, which was actually at Egmere. From being a decoy base in 1941 it became operational in December 1943 when it passed into the control of No. 100 (Bomber Support) Group whose major function was the operation of radio counter measures to reduce the escalating losses of RAF night bombers due to the ever-increasing effectiveness of the German air defence system.

From May 1944 onwards Short Stirlings flew from the base, dropping metallic reflective material, called 'window' to give the effect of much larger forces of aircraft and contrariwise, an onboard jamming device called Mandrel which screened the existence of other aircraft in the sky. Allied bomber losses had become unsustainable due to the development by Germany of sophisticated radar tracking devices which enabled both anti-aircraft guns and night fighters to identify and destroy bombers. Window was used to simulate large forces in what were known as 'spoof' raids, dropping the aluminium strips from a small number of planes apparently heading in a different direction from that of an actual raid so diverting fighter aircraft from them. Mandrel meanwhile prevented the Germans from knowing the dispositions and intended destinations of much larger numbers of actual bombers. Sometimes aircraft would fly back and forth in a creeping pattern, sometimes with or ahead of the bombers, It was used to dramatic effect on D Day when the destination of the landings in Normandy was concealed while spoof squadrons creating the effect of large numbers of aircraft setting



RAF North Creake 1945

off for Calais. During its short operational life seventeen aircraft were lost, eight Stirlings and nine Handley Page Halifaxes. The Halifaxes, more powerful than the Stirlings which they superseded, could carry bombs as well as radar equipment and were able to remind the Germans of our capacity to inflict damage by air.

There was accommodation for nearly 3,400 personnel who were dispersed around the perimeter of its three intersecting runways. The airfield buildings bestraddled the Fakenham Road which nevertheless remained open to the public, (except when a Halifax ran off the runway and caught fire when it hit a tree). RAF North Creake ceased operations at the end of the war. Though the runways were removed, the control tower still exists, having been converted inside into a 1940's period house.

The influx of troops was not always a blessing. Wanton damage was done by troops billeted in Holkham; The Council was asked to participate in a scheme for the treatment of venereal disease. But unlike during the earlier war, propaganda intended to raise the morale of the populace was unceasing. Following Warship Week in early 1941 the town was asked to adopt HMS Rockingham, a US vessel which had been transferred to the Royal Navy.

As D Day drew near convoys of American army lorries supported by tanks would arrive, driving down the Quay, chewing up the roadways with their tracks, their crews throwing packets of gum to eager local children. The girls, it is said, had never had so much choice; the Regal cinema on Clubbs Lane became a Mecca for off-duty servicemen. The story goes that on the eve of D Day, many of the service personnel from Egmore were in the cinema and a message was flashed onto the screen requesting them to return to the base immediately. Earlier in the war the manager succeeded in emptying the place by interrupting the film with the news that German paratroopers had been dropped at Blakeney. The Park Cinema which functioned only intermittently sought a reduction in its rates because of its winter closure, without success. The presence of troops was bound to create problems from time to time. The Council reported wanton damage in the town in January 1942 caused by troops billeted in Holkham who had come into the town for the evening. While admitting their vital presence, a protest was made.

It is impossible to know at what point people began to lose their fear of losing the war. Government propaganda was bound to attempt to boost morale. No doubt with government encouragement, even as early as April 1941 plans being made for the reconstruction and redevelopment of the town 'to be implemented after the termination of hostilities' Produced by the self-styled North West Norfolk Joint Regional Planning committee a draft planning scheme for Wells was presented to the council. It proposed the zoning of land in various categories. There were to be Private Open Spaces (mostly land belonging to the Earl of Leicester), Public Open Spaces such as the Buttlands and Church Marsh; land zoned for different densities of housing across the town; Industrial Zones and land on which building would

be permanently restricted: in short, a comprehensive delineation of development. Interestingly, within the last category were the two entrances to the town, from the Egmore and Burnham directions, both of which were developed in recent years. Like all plans what happened was not quite what had been proposed. On the other hand, the more local five-year plan, particularly in respect of council housing and a new sewerage system were not far from being begun.

By the autumn of 1943 the council was already in negotiation with Holkham for the sale of fourteen and a half acres of land adjacent to Northfield Lane for building. 16 houses were proposed, which rose to 30. By the following January, the proposals were being formulated for 'Post-war Reconstruction' and in the September a Committee was formed to coordinate the building of sixty council houses including 40 'pre-fabs', the long awaited sewerage scheme, new street lighting; re-planning the beach and playing fields, new gas provision, an industrial area, an extension to the cemetery and new refuse collection arrangements. A new Fire Station was proposed, to be built between the Polka and the Flour Mill. The adoption by the County Council of the 1944 Education Act was noted with approval. (The Act raised the school leaving age and re-organised secondary education). The council seemed to have become a different creature from that which had opposed or fought over almost all improvements to the town no more than have a dozen years earlier.

Following D Day, it proposed the fixing of street lights 'as soon as present lighting restrictions be released'. By February 1945 the East Anglian Electricity Supply Company was asked to quote for the provision of 79 electric street lamps in the town. It offered a seven-year contract at £327.6s, the lamps to be lit from half an hour before sunset until midnight. The estimated cost of the sewerage scheme,

including connection to every house was £12,670 – though toilets, inconveniently, were to be downstairs! A contract was made for making good the street surfaces following the sewerage works, at a cost of £2155. All of these works required long term loans, but this now seemed not to deter the council in spite of post-war austerity. Cuts would come later.

House building entailed the biggest investment: almost on VE day, the council formulated its detailed proposals for new houses: there were to be ten each of three bedroomed, two bedroomed and two bedroomed pensioners' bungalows and twenty pre-fabs, subsequently reduced to ten. In the meantime, the Council concerned itself with the under-occupation of its properties and with empty houses. Government, central and local did not fear to impose its priorities on people's domestic arrangements. A government circular drew attention to the requisitioning of unoccupied houses; eight properties in the town were requisitioned. A number of tenants whose houses were too big for their needs were required to exchange and, given notice to quit (under a Victorian statute now repealed) if they refused.

Looking to the future and in early anticipation of the tourism season the council fixed new fees for the beach car park and charges for the boating lake. A Beach manager with staff was appointed. A bus service to the beach was to be begun.

The Council showed its dismay that the Air Ministry continued to use the air space over the beach for aerial exercises. The official reply was to the effect that no other exercise area could be found, that they would take place only over a stretch of beach 400 yards long and on 48 hours per month but that these would be divided into one and a half hour operations in morning and evening. – in

other words, virtually twice a day. The council sent a telegram requesting that “no further exercises shall take place pending further correspondence.” It demanded that East Hills cease to be used as a firing range.

There was a real enthusiasm for all marks of war to be removed. Barbed wire was to be removed from areas of the marshes and with assistance from the personnel of High Cape RAF Camp; the beach was to be cleared of barbed wire as soon as the War Department released it which should be ‘as soon as possible’. A request that a mine sweep of the beach be conducted by the War Department was denied. The sudden closure of the RAF Camp in the August left the council once more responsible. A local company was asked to quote for the removal of the tubular steel tank traps. The road block, one of a number, at the west end of the Quay was to be removed.

In dribs and drabs demobilised service personnel began to return to their jobs and resume their lives. No one talked in those days of stress disorder but plenty of them must have found it very difficult to adjust

Roger Arguile



Record of what took place in Wells next the Sea in World War Two

Ed: The following piece was submitted by Lesley Jarvis, and as you will see consists of a diary written during the war. She doesn't know who the author was – and she typed it out many years ago (on a typewriter!). If anyone can throw any light on the original author, we would be very pleased to have the details.

1939

September 3 — War was declared. We were already working at A.R.P. I was doing ambulance driving with my car and gas lectures and first aid. I got my certificate and silver badge. We used to practice at night, picking up the wounded and dead. Then we 'stood to' one night to collect gas masks from Thursford Union, a dread place to drive a car, we assembled and fitted 200 the next day, and the rest later, very hard work.

Mother had been ill in August and we had great difficulty in getting a nurse, so many had been called up. I used to go in my garden 'snailing' but the police Sgt. asked me to stop, he said my torch was too bright. The search lights showed every night. I used to watch the ships being convoyed by destroyers, 25 in a line.

October - The soldiers came to Stiffkey Camp, they arrived in decrepit looking buses with Putney on them and vans looking like Black Marias and masses of lorries. They drove all round Wells to show us they were here.

One night someone set the rubbish dump on fire, it blazed for most of the night and could been seen for miles. The Church

room was commandeered by G Cain, he turned all the chairs out into the porch, Mr. Moss was furious. Then the room was fitted up as a hospital operating table, cases of instruments etc. and partitioned off into compartments. We took turns sitting up at night in case of an air raid, then it was stopped, and we went after the siren. Dr Sturdee and Dr Little gave us lectures. We met every Friday. In November 2 mines were washed up on the beach, these were exploded by the Admiralty. 2 parachutes, one by the sluice gate and one on the marsh, were guarded by the police.

December - The evacuees arrived. The Miss Everitts chose one with an awful squint. Christmas day, I spent it with mother, lovely and warm. There is a listening post at Cuckoo Lodge, this is manned night and day. A search light party is there also. A large air raid shelter to hold 150 people has been made on the Buttlands. I have laid up my car, I miss it dreadfully.

1940

February — Dreadfully cold, deep snow and freezing. John has come home ill with chickenpox. March -Very heavy gun fire all day.

March 14th - Very heavy snow, masses of planes over.

April — Much air activity.

May 25th ~ Big gun in parts being unloaded at the railway station. Red buoys in the quay for patrol boats.

May 26th — We have been warned to look out for red flares or 'stars' which mean enemy planes near, take cover and report to first aid post.

May 27th - An unexpected warning was given by a plane showing a flare to try out the soldiers, people in the cinema nearly frantic and Bernard Prone was relieved of his post.

All our fishing boats but one has been ordered by the Admiralty to Dunkirk to help bring the army away. Bombers over most of the night. We had our first spy scare, a man was arrested for trying unsuccessfully, to buy a gun from Rose.

May 30th - Mother went away with Uncle Alex, Batterby took me to Fakenham to see the barricades, we were challenged by the soldiers with fixed bayonets.

May 31st — The siren went, I got up at 12.30 am and went to the first aid post, masses of flares over. The enemy dropped bombs near Fakenham. On duty again last night, the all clear sounded 3 hours later. A few of our boats have returned from Dunkirk.

June 2nd - 15 airmen are keeping watch on the beach. Mrs. Hick's 2 Austrian maids have been ordered to leave the east coast.

Just received a wire saying mother is very ill. Hubert took me to Llandudno, but we were too late.

Tuesday night - very disturbed, siren sounded, the enemy planes were over, a bomb was dropped, the house shook.

Wednesday - Mother was buried at Sharrington. the hearse bringing her home got lost at Thursford, they rang me, I sent Batterby to guide them to Sharrington. It has been the most depressing, lonely and worrying time I ever remember.

Up again nearly all night, walking to the First Aid post in the

dark is most alarming, the home guard jumped out of the Rectory gateway and grabbed me and shouted 'Halt, who goes there?' I felt quite shaken. I told our commandant that she must give me some distinguishing badge for the wretches to see, or I must resign, I made the guard walk with me to the post. Very heavy gun fire last night chandelier flares were dropped, it was bright as daytime outside.

Thursday -- The Pioneer Battalion arrived and are digging trenches on the beach road, on the quay and on the marshes, they are sleeping in the beach huts.

Busloads of soldiers arrived today, the Bren guns came by train, with lots of tanks and ammunition. I watched them unload. I was on duty at the Church Room from 12.30 to 6.30 am then I came home and had a hot bath; it's awful in that room all night. A petrol pump is on the quay for the speed boats. Soldiers here every night to keep watch on the beach. A mine was blown up today and shook the place.

July 11th — 4 patrol boats arrive, 2 of them armoured. Tonight, the armoured train came to the station. Four mine sweepers arrived and are lying off Stiffkey. Three railway engines leave here every night to go to Dereham. The armoured train crashed into the station, hit some stationary coaches and was badly damaged, there were a few minor casualties. It's a queer looking affair.

Many more soldiers arrived in buses, lots of motorbike soldiers about each night.

All that was left of mother's furniture was sold on Wednesday. I was on duty all night and am so weary of it all.

A German plane roared over this road flying very low. The Germans flew one of our captured Blenheims and machine-gunned the soldiers on the beach. A sentry is on duty every night by the old lifeboat house, no one is allowed on the beach after 8 pm.

September 7th - The siren sounded, two soldiers from the beach were in town without leave, a lorry was sent for them and collided with them on their motor bikes, they were both killed, two sergeants, both Dunkirk men.

September 25th — Soldiers laying mine on the beach accidentally exploded one, blew' two of them to bits, the sergeant was blown across the road and injured.

A soldier in the Fleece had some drink and was showing off his rifle, it went off and killed another soldier, hit a national guard in the hand, a court martial was held.

October 12th - Lots of ships passed. This road was full of the largest lorries I have ever seen, a convoy went through. 17 buses some had Ascot only and some had Metropolitan on them. Masses of Bren guns, motor bikes, cars and heaps of luggage vans piled up. Soldiers were on point duty at Walsingham's Corner. An enemy plane was being chased by one of ours, they roared over here machine gunning each other, my little Peter was terrified. Smith, living in California Terrace had a bullet through the roof of his shed, a curious flat thing. The planes just missed the roofs, I watched them, the noise was terrific. A machine gun is on the quay now. and is always manned. Evelyn's tenants have been warned about showing their lights in the bungalow.

December 8th ~ The siren short circuited and made queer noises. Soldiers are being billeted in private houses. I am having such unpleasantness from airmen from Creake, they want their female friend billeted near, and have been very rude when I refused to take them.

W V S were at the station at 5 am to meet the troop train from Peterborough, it did not arrive until 7am; we were frozen. We opened the W V S canteen in Mr. G Smith's billiard room. Mrs. Chamberlain in command.

1941

December 26th — I helped in the canteen Christmas and boxing day. I went and helped.

1942

January 5th — Deep snow, very difficult walking.

January 9th — The sirens sounded 3 times, lots of bombs dropped.

January 10th - I helped to serve tea and sandwiches at the station, a special with 7 coaches pulled as far as the signal box and stopped, after several attempts to restart it the driver gave up and had to wait for another engine. We watched them being pushed off at 7am raining hard.

We had the canteen at the station again and served about 400 men

A curious looking Dutch boat is in the quay unloading huge anchors for the Fleet Air Arm speed boats

Sunday afternoon leave for the Fleet Air Arm has been cancelled because the binoculars have been stolen.

25 Jerrys over, one was brought down near Bircham aerodrome. We had a crash warning and the lifeboat and the speed boats went to sea, two of our fighters had collided bringing the Jerry down.

The soldiers are laying rails to run guns along the Old Beach bank

The siren went and the fire engine sent for, Fred Ryder's stack was on fire from incendiary bombs. Lots of ships going by. The pilot boat Radstock is here.

The neon light is very bright now. The new lot of soldiers, Liverpool/Irish, are a dirty lot, very rough, they burst open Mr. Well's show cases and stole the contents, they had a rough house at The Globe and smashed Mr. Reeve's window and cleared off.

We have many more nurses at the First Aid post, I shall not be on duty so often.

1943

January 7th -- I watched the queen Bee being loaded on a lorry.

January 12th — 3 bombs dropped in Market Lane, no damage. A bit of shrapnel fell on the bed in the observation post. A mine was washed up by the old Lifeboat house, it was dragged away and exploded on the marshes.

January 16th - A most disturbed night. 6 huge tanks with wireless came through today. The house shook and the doors rattled.

March 6th — Lots of planes over.

April - Nothing much this month, Rachel and I took an expectant mother to the Cambridge maternity home, she was ill most of the time. On arrival we were met by a haughty dictator of a matron, who ordered us to a back street where these 'mothers to be' had to stay until their babies arrived. There were several other girls in the same predicament, who gave this poor frightened thing a welcome and a cup of tea. God help them with such a woman, inhumane, overdressed creature. Such people should never be allowed in those homes.

June - We gave the RE's a farewell party. Another troop train in. A dead German washed up, mostly eaten by fish.

I have had an accident, knocked down by 3 men on bikes, in bed a fortnight with concussion. 2 broken ribs and sundry cuts.

July — Soldiers are stealing from so many gardens. I had to have the police here last night, one was in my back yard.

My John is in North Africa.

A destroyer is in the Quay. Some of the sailors are most amusing and play a wonderful game of billiards. One of them had been rescued, his ship had been torpedoed, he was wearing a girl's fairisle jumper and dress trousers.

We were all disgusted at the Countess of Albermarle, who came to inspect the canteen, she did not ask any particulars but was togged up in a very smart green uniform.

No letter from John, very worrying.

The Lincolns stationed at Holkham got tight and took down the signs over the butcher's shop, were fighting in the Edinburgh, also in French's fish and chip shop. They broke Mrs. Smith's sundial and took her little cannons and put them in the street. We are now out of bounds for them. "Daphne" of Freeman Street has been put out of bounds to all soldiers.

August 22nd — 700 soldiers arrived today; their band played them part way to Stiffkey. A plane crashed near the water tower; soldiers were on guard all night. The trailer taking the wrecked plane away hit the churchyard wall and knocked a huge bit out.

Much dissatisfaction amongst the decontamination squad, 4 men get £3.12.0 per week, one is on permanent duty and cooks etc. for the others who come in and go to bed. The voluntary workers patrol the streets at night without food. Lots of bombs dropped last night, no sleep for anyone. I am so tired of it all.

September — Many Scottish soldiers here now, such nice men, so helpful in the canteen. Our first blood transfusion, horrid.

The Hampton's house was burgled, a soldier's uniform was found in Market Lane, Mr. Hampton's clothes and money were taken and a man was later caught in London.

Mrs. Smith's house was entered; someone had been all over the house, dropping matches, even in the cellar. In the porch was an empty whiskey bottle and empty packet of cigarettes. Only two pairs of shoes were missing.

We have a resident burglar in town, lots of houses and shops

have been entered. At the Co-op they stripped the shop and all the ration books were taken and they borrowed the shop's lorry.

No one heard them but in the morning lots of tins of food were picked up and the shop opened. Lord Coke's house at Holkham was entered and half a pig was taken. A woman's foot mark was seen in each case, a lorry took the pork and stuff away. Sometime later Lord Cook's house was broken into again. The man went into the daughter's bedroom, she woke up and tried to call for help. This man then put his hands round the child's throat and bruised her, she was very frightened. She made some noise and woke the nurse, the man then cleared off. Lord Leicester was called, and he sent for the doctor and Sergeant Garntham, the Sgt thought the child had had a nightmare, but the Dr thought differently. Lord Leicester sent for a detective. After some weeks he found a man and woman living in a disused van in the park. He went to the van and a ferocious Alsatian flew at him which he shot with his revolver. He went inside and saw the woman who tried to grab her handbag, but the detective got it and found a loaded revolver inside. He then called more police and some soldiers who watched the roads. Later the man tried to get home on a stolen motor bike and was caught. He is a Wells man and a deserter from the army.

October — A plane crashed, only the pilot was saved. 2 bodies were washed up.

October 16th - First Aid inspection. Four of us have to be on night duty instead of two

October 29th — Lots of Jerrys over here, machine gunning, 3 bombs dropped on Wells Creek, set fire to a straw stack, star shaped firework-looking things were dropped. The fire engine put out the stack fire. Another disturbed night, lots of gun fire.

November — A troop train left with 2 engines in front, another had to push behind. A huge convoy through here. The Jerry were here last night trying to get the railway station, I think. They dropped a bomb on the marsh behind the gate house, made a huge crater. Some splinters hit my house; I woke up hearing the roof tiles smashing on the bricks outside. I got up and was flung across the room. Masses of stones and hard lumps of soil came in the window, the door stuck but I got it open and was flung about the passage by the blast. My little Peter was howling and had crawled under the gas stove, my cat was petrified with fright. The noise outside was dreadful, an air battle. They had dropped chandelier flares; I went and watched them. No wardens came, I felt very shaken and frightened. I dressed and went to see the damage. Lots of tiles smashed and a large piece of shrapnel in the wood work. My bird table was halved, and another piece of shrapnel was stuck in the ground. The grass was smothered in stones, machine gun bullets and bits of shrapnel. I feel this is the end of me, I can't stand much more, I dread the night coming, no one cares.

We had our first invasion test, we treated 40 cases, the dead cart went around. Freeman street was taken by the enemy.

November 15th — Civil Defense day. We all marched to the War Memorial after church. 300 of us. Home Guard, Fire Service, Ambulance drivers, 1st Aid, Air Force and Scouts.

A large speed boat is here A very disturbed night, lots of bombs somewhere near.

December — I helped at the canteen on Christmas Day, very few soldiers.

John is with the 8th army, his Commanding Officer is Col Sir

Oliver Lease. He gave John 500 cigarettes

1943

Have just heard that John is very ill with dysentery. I dread telegrams, feel afraid to open them.

4 ships in last Monday with balloons. The Admiral came to the canteen last night when I was on duty, congratulated us and thanked us for looking after the men. He had a cup of coffee and a very stale bun!

Black American soldiers here now, too smart, too much jewelry and too much money. They want us to take a £1 note for 6d worth of food.

A man called Page was blown to bits on the beach mine field.

Gliders over today. A large convoy of ships passed.

The Bishop of Norwich preached here.

A big Dutch boat laden with barley is stuck in the channel in the mud. The pilot boat tried to get it off, but a hole was made in the bottom of the boat and lots of barley poured out. She was towed into the Quay and the fire engine pumped water out of it all day. Now it is going away to the docks for repair. Nice looking men on it.

It is bitterly cold in the 1st Aid room at night. I was thankful to get home at 6am and have a hot bath and get to bed.

The Air Fleet here distinguished themselves by letting one of the speed boats sink. The sentry did not miss it, possibly did not know how many we have. When he was relieved it was missed, he called out the guard and police. They searched the beach and marshes, thinking it was stolen, called up the

Officers billeted in the hotel and there was great excitement. However, when the tide went out, the police saw the masts sticking out of the water and it was hauled up onto the Quay. It will cost £1000 to repair.

Our chess men and board and a towel were stolen last night.

2 landing craft came, and a body was washed up on the beach. An enormous American convoy through, crowds of lorries staked with large guns, bren guns, jeeps, wireless vans etc. Maneuvers here all day. Our big gun misjudged the range and blew a man to bits and badly injured another. Mines were exploded on the marshes. A New Zealand airman's body was washed up. More ships with balloons arrived. Very few in the canteen, all leave stopped. The siren went twice in the night. I hear so seldom from John. He says heat terrific, water short, flies dreadful. I feel a lot is doing soon, a lot was inked out of his letter by the censor.

1944

June 6th - D Day. Have now heard that John is in Italy. The troop ship hit a mine; he was in the water for 4 hours before being picked up, nearly dead. Lots of men drowned. I feel so thankful he is safe, everything was lost, the ship sank. In his next letter he said that the men who picked them up were wonderful. He was stiff with cold and nearly dead, they put them in blankets and gave them hot grog and rubbed them down. John is now fighting under Sir Harold Alexander; he says he is a grand soldier and all the men would do anything for him.

The Admiral and his staff arrived here in a small destroyer, ordered all people to be cleared off the beach. There was a special gun practice.

One of our planes loaded to bomb Germany had engine trouble and landed on the North Point. The lifeboat went out, but all was well.

The royal train arrived here at midnight, the King slept in a siding. He went to the aerodrome and shot at Holkham. The train had 2 coaches; a large police officer followed the King in another car; our station master looked grand. The engine was too big for the turntable here, so it had to go to Dereham to be turned around. The school children had been lined up to cheer the King, but he forgot to look at them. No sugar beet was allowed to be sent here the previous day, the station was closed and washed and the line from Lynn was specially tested. The Royal party included the Duke of Gloucester. They went off and forgot to pay for 8 pints of milk.

1945

January — An awful blizzard here, deep snow, I am completely frozen in. The porch is filled with snow and the back door frozen. I can't get out of the house, all the windows are frozen, the telephone is out of order. A squad of men came this afternoon and let me out.

A huge explosion somewhere, the glass fell out of my barometer and some china fell off the shelf.

Three little grey ships in the quay. The churchyard has been taken over by the County Council, the graves disturbed, and stones removed. Some of the bodies, in the coffins that were opened, looked just as if they had been recently buried. I think it is shameful and should never have been allowed. Mr. Moss and the Church council agreed to it, it's desecration.

A burglar entered a house in Park Road and stole £61, they also took a handbag with money and ration books in it from another house.

The barbed wire is being removed from the beach by Italian prisoners. They come around selling things they make, shoes toys etc. A plane carrying food to Holland dropped a sack of sugar on Mr. Loynes office, it went through the roof and burst on the floor.

The Red X and 1st Aid post disbanded, we had a party to celebrate.

I went to an RAF ceremony at North Creake by invitation, the disbandment of two squadrons. The Bishop of Norwich gave an address in a hangar, Lord Leicester read a lesson. We had a lovely tea in the Officer's Mess.

1946

Mrs. G Smith resigned from the Women's Institute; Mrs. Flint was elected as president.

The prisoners of war have cleared the beach of all the iron railings and tank traps. Several German prisoners from Matlaske, who have been clearing up, stole a lorry and tried to get away. Abel saw them and called the police; they were all caught.

May — I heard from John say that on a few hours leave he had been to the Vatican City. He had seen the Pope; the guards are most spectacular. The Pope sits and keeps his eye fixed and never blinks. Everywhere was very dirty. He had also been to Venice but said it's so badly knocked about. He says the old Italians looked starved and dirty. Wine very cheap. John was in a place called Wdine, not far from the Austrian border, where they were loading up tanks to go to the front. They arrived a few days before the Germans surrendered.

WLHG Books and DVDs

The following books and discs, published by the group, are currently in print and are available. The first price is for the general public, the second in the concessionary price to members. Members who live out of town may buy post and packaging free, in exchange for the fact that they are generally unable to attend the talks.

Contact:

Nita Spencer, 30a Theatre Road, Wells-next-the-Sea, NR23 1DJ
01328 710501 – jnornita@aol.com

TOWN WALKS: (4 available)

South Route, Central Route, East End Route, West End Route,
£2.00 each, - members £1.50

A SKETCHBOOK WITH NOTES

A collection of the sketches from the above walk books
£2.00 – members £1.50

DVD DISCS (4 available)

- 1) Wells Harbour
- 2) Harbour Disc Two – Beach, Floods, Lifeboats etc.
- 3) Wells Town 1 – Church, Railway, Burnt St., Church St., High St., Polka Road, and School
- 4) Wells Town 2 – Staithe St., Freeman St., Buttlands, Gas Works, Hospital

All the above a collection of old photographs with commentary by Maureen Dye – last between 30 and 40 minutes each
£5.00 – members £4.00

WHEN I WAS A YOUNG LAD – MEMORIES OF WELLS

Reprint of the book by Geoff Perkins – members only - £8.00

WELLS-NEXT-THE-SEA – A SMALL PORT AND A WIDE WORLD

Not published by us but selling it on behalf of Poppyland Publishing
Roger Arguile – Paperback Version only - £14.95 -members £12.00

TALKS PROGRAMME

All at the W.I. HALL, Church Plain – all Wednesdays

2019

- September 4th** 7.30pm Orla Kennedy
The Second Air Division at Sculthorpe
- October 2nd** 7.30pm Steve Adcock
Early Policing in Wells
- November 6th** 7.30pm Cyril Sutherland
Fishing off Norfolk
- December 4th** **2.30pm** Stephen Pope
The Victorian Workhouse

2020

- January** no meeting
- February 5th** **2.30pm** Christine Hiskey
Holkham Revisited
- March 4th** 7.30pm Nicholas Vincent
Binham Priory
- April 1st** 7.30pm Robert & Liz Scott
Blickling Hall
- May 6th** 7.30pm Keith Leesmith
HMS Rockingham (Sponsored by Wells in WW2)
- May 13th** 7.30pm
Annual General Meeting & Members' Social Evening

The next Newsletter will be published around Christmas time