

THE PARISH AT WAR

By Derek Rawlings

War was declared at 11 a.m. on Sunday 3rd September 1939. Many Danehill residents were attending Matins at the Parish Church and the news of the declaration of war was brought to them by the Vicar's son, Jack Kempe, who had heard the Prime Minister's broadcast on the radio. Within half an hour the air raid siren at Haywards Heath was heard. Although this was only a practice, it brought home to everyone the dreadful fact that the country was again at war with Germany.

The immediate consequences of the declaration of war were the blackout, the arrival of evacuees from London and the putting of the Civil Defence on a war footing. The blackout was particularly difficult for those with electric lighting as ordinary curtains were, in the main, too thin and badly fitting to be effective. Over the days and weeks ahead suitable arrangements were made - often with frames covered with opaque material that could be put up at night and taken down in the morning. Large buildings, such as the Parish Church, had special difficulties. By October, even though Summer Time had been extended by six weeks to the 18th November, the darkening evenings made it necessary to transfer Evensong to the smaller Chapel at Chelwood Gate. From October 1940 there was Single Summer Time in the winter with Double Summer Time in the summer. It was not until 29th December 1940 that blackout curtains were fitted to the parish church - the gift of Mr. & Mrs. Hawkins Turner of Shotover (now Church Hill House) in Church Lane. Outside street lights were turned off and cars had hoods put over their headlights blacking one out and permitting the minimum of light to shine down the road from the other. At the same time mudguards were painted white, white lines were put down the middle of the more important roads and kerbs were whitened. Petrol was rationed within the month. Food rationing started on 8th January 1940, initially only covering butter (4 oz), bacon and ham (4 oz) and sugar (12 oz), with extra sugar for jam-making and bee-keepers. Chocolate and sweets, margarine, eggs, milk, bread, meat, soap, clothes and coal were to follow in due course.

The specific gravity of beer was reduced by 5%, whisky production was reduced by 10%, whilst the making of gold jewellery was banned except for standardized wedding rings to be sold at a set price of £1 1s (£1.05).

The evacuees from various parts of London arrived the day war was declared. They were taken to the Vicarage and from there placed in private houses. Residents had been asked in advance if they would take children or mothers and babies and, after some difficulties, all were settled. Billeting allowances were 8s-6d (42p) per week for children, raised to 10s-6d from 2nd March 1940 for those over 14 years, and 3s-3d (16p) for children with their mothers.

The school, which should have restarted after the summer holidays on 5th September, was kept closed for a further week. Term began on Monday 11th September and 37 evacuees were admitted to the roll on that day, with a further 14 admissions before the end of the month. On the Tuesday a school canteen was opened catering for about 75 each day.

At the beginning of October there were 89 evacuees in Danehill - 13 unaccompanied children and 30 mothers with 46 children under 5. By then, because of the phoney war, people were returning to London. The School Log Book records 9 returning and the pupils of St. Mary's School, Lewisham, who were evacuated to Danehill as a school unit and did not join our school, being transferred to Rotherfield. The blitz on London in 1940 brought a further wave of evacuees and, during the 5½ years of war, 180 such children spent some time at Danehill School.

Danehill Civil Defence, under the Head Warden Lt. Col. Clementi-Smith of Tanyard Farm, still had a great deal of training and organizing to do. A Warden's Post was established at The Orange Tea Rooms attached to The White House in the centre of the village. In the field alongside a circular water tank was erected for fire fighting purposes; there being no piped water in the parish. An auxiliary fire section with one - later two - tenders, and a trailer pump, was based in the

Press Back Button to Return to the Index

old bus garage next to The Red Lion at Chelwood Gate, with 4 volunteers on duty each night. The garage was also used later by the Home Guard. Besides the regular fire engine at Forest Row, there was also a small tender and trailer pump with a full time crew based at Dean Edwards' yard in Bonfire Lane, Horsted Keynes. The musician "Scan" Tester was a member of this crew.



were invited.

A first aid post was set up at Stocklands and there was also one at Woodgate (now Cumnor House School) but the latter soon moved when the military took over the house. The first troops to come to the parish were the 1st Battalion London Irish Rifles with their camp at the Isle of Thorns. They attended their first parade at the parish church on Sunday 29th October 1939. Their pipes and drums played at the Remembrance Day Service on Sunday 12th November. At Christmas the troops gave a party to which all the children

MRS PYE WITH MRS CHARMAN AT "STOCKLANDS" FIRST AID POST.

Throughout the war the civil population was encouraged to make voluntary contributions to the war effort - a challenge that many were happy to accept, although the standard rate of income tax was to rise to 10s (50p) in the pound. The contributions included collecting scrap metal and waste paper, knitting woollen comforts for servicemen, entertaining locally-based troops and subscribing to various war weapons funds. Local organizations took an active part in promoting such activities, especially the Church, Red Cross, Women's Institute, Parish Council and Women's Voluntary Service. The latter had been formed nationally in 1938 out of existing organizations to assist in hospitals, with air raid victims, evacuees and in many other ways.

The Church Magazine reports many of these voluntary efforts. Unfortunately it could not be issued between August 1941 and October 1945 because of a paper shortage; a period during which the national newspapers were, on some days, down to two pages.

The February 1940 issue contained an advertisement for the Freshfield Lane Brickworks with an appeal from the Red Cross for silver paper. It also reports a special performance for the London Irish Rifles of the Church Social Club's production of "The Ghost Train".

In August there was news of a salvage campaign started at Chelwood Gate by the WVS. Depots were opened daily from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. at The Coach & Horses, Gorselands Bungalow in Beaconsfield Road, and Highfield and Christopher Fields in Church Lane. The proceeds went to Danehill & Chelwood Gate Red Cross Working Parties to buy wool, etc. to make comforts for servicemen. By 1945 23 tons of salvage had been collected and 6,900 garments made.

In October there was an appeal for contributions to the Spitfire Fund with collecting boxes in licensed premises, the British Legion Club and the Post Offices. In the next issue appeared "The Appeal will close on December 1st. The Parish Council hopes all will 'GO TO IT' during the remaining four weeks".

SPITFIRES OVER DANEHURST, DANEHILL 1940.

In January 1941 the Chairman of the Parish Council asked people to entertain soldiers in their own homes and in March the Church set aside £20, in the Vicar's hands, to help parishioners



Press Back Button to Return to the Index

suffering loss or damage due to the war. It was also noted that the school had exchanged letters with H.M.S. Danehill, a naval patrol vessel with a crew of 5, and sent them a parcel of books and toilet requisites.

In June the announcement was made of The New War Weapons Drive - "Help to Buy our Tommy Gun". The Danehill National Savings Group aimed to raise an extra £30 per week - enough to purchase one gun.

During the war there were extra people in the parish, both evacuees and military, so the shops and public houses were busy, though many goods were rationed or in short supply and some prices were fixed by the Government to prevent profiteering. The petrol pumps at Danehill, at the site now occupied by Curtain Craft, were taken over for military supplies and both the Ashdown and Mid-Sussex Garages used their facilities to make war supplies. The former made munitions and such things as ends for flame throwers, whilst the latter made spare parts for guns. In fact, their motor trade was seriously restricted, especially after the basic petrol ration was withdrawn in March 1942.

The German invasion of The Netherlands on 10th May 1940, the subsequent retreat from Dunkirk (27th May to 4th June) and the surrender of France on 22 June dramatically brought closer the physical threat of war to South East England. The immediate fear was of an invasion, against which a national unpaid defence force was formed of men aged between 17 and 65 years. Originally called the Local Defence Volunteers, the name was changed to the Home Guard in July 1940. Danehill's volunteers were in the 14th Platoon 17th Sussex Battalion Home Guard. At this time all signposts and other displays of county, town or village names were removed to confuse an invading enemy. They were not replaced until mid-March 1944.



The Battle of Britain, Germany's attempt to overwhelm the Royal Air Force and bomb the population into submission, began on 17th July. The first local bombs were dropped near Woolpack Farm in Bell Lane, Fletching at 2.40 a.m. on Wednesday 14th August. The next day 3 high-explosive bombs fell in the field between Latchetts Farm and Lindwood on the west side of 8th November there were a further 14 incidents in the parish - see appendix.

DOG FIGHT OVER DANEHURST, DANEHILL.

The largest was a stick of 11 bombs dropped at 3 p.m. on Monday 14th October. The first fell near Swithe Wood in Horsted Lane and the last in the burial ground. There was only slight damage to property, 4 bombs falling close to houses, and Freshfield Lane was closed for a while.

Typical of the spirit of the time, a party from the Pioneer Corps came on their own initiative and filled in the crater in the burial ground, whilst a number of residents led by Mr. Etherton, the blacksmith, tidied up and helped repair the Lych Gate which had been damaged.



BOMB CRATER IN CEMETERY



DAMAGE TO LYCH GATE

Chelwood Gate. Owners of stirrup pumps in the parish were asked to form parties and help their near neighbours.

In addition, a German ME 110 aircraft was brought down at 9.40 a.m. on 27th September on Ashdown Forest behind The Gale. The two occupants were killed and both were buried in Danehill burial ground. After the war the bodies were returned to Germany.

As a result of the great numbers of fires started all over the country by the bombing, fire watching was put on an established basis by the Firewatchers Order of October 194, and a small number of residents undertook this duty based at

The need for civil defence remained throughout the war and the organisation was continually being brought up to date. By 1942, in addition to the Air Raid Wardens, the Auxiliary Fire Service and Firewatchers, there were first aid posts at Highfield in Church Lane and Stocklands in Doctors Lane at Chelwood Gate, a casualty reception of 18 beds at Shotover and other facilities at Ashdown House, Danehurst in Danehill and Chelworth in Chelwood Gate.

Although the threat of invasion receded when Hitler attacked Russia, contingency plans were kept under review. In May 1941 it was decided that, if the threat materialised, the 650 people due to be moved to Danehill from the coast should go instead to Forest Row. The reason was our lack of mains drainage and a piped water supply; neither of which were to come until after the war.

About this time Mr. G. Haslarn was appointed Voluntary Food Organiser for Danehill and Furners Green and Mr. E. W. Pye of Stocklands for Chelwood Gate. In the event of invasion they were to be responsible for the equitable distribution of foodstuffs.

In 1942 Lt. Col.. Clementi-Smith was nominated to represent Danehill in a triumvirate for liaison between the civil power and the military. Mr. D. Lucas of Reapeyears, Chelwood Gate and Mr. H. Tunks of The Stores, Furners Green were to act at a local level.

The military build-up for the invasion of France on 6th June 1944 was as apparent in Danehill in the preceding months as it was in the rest of Southern England. The invasion, however, was soon followed by the German attack on the London area with the V1 pilotless flying bombs, many of which came down in Kent and East Sussex. The second V1 to be launched and the first to fall in Sussex was clearly seen from Danehill in the early morning on Tuesday 12th June before exploding at Mizbrook Farm, north of Cuckfield, As the allied armies advanced and overran the launching sites, the bombs only having a range of 185 miles, their numbers decreased and by August all the sites had been overrun. Luckily none of the bombs fell in Danehill, though many passed over, 3 failing just beyond the parish boundary.

At 7.20 p.m. on 11th July a V1, flying in a north-westerly direction at 1000 feet, was destroyed in the air by one of our own aircraft and crashed in woodland close to Freshfield Lane Brickworks. On the 18th another gliding in the same direction, its engine having cut out, fell at 1.35 a.m. in a field at Pound Farm, across the road from The Sheffield Arms. It killed one horse, wounded another and did structural damage to two properties leaving a crater 6 feet x 2 feet. Eight minutes after midnight on 30th July, one flying north at fifteen feet exploded above the ground at Pressridge Warren, causing slight damage to Wych Cross Place.

In consequence of the attacks some children were evacuated to safer areas. Danehill School's Log Book records that on 15th July fifteen local children were evacuated to Port Talbot in South Wales,

Press Back Button to Return to the Index

where they attended the Cwmavon School. The journey was made by train. Carriages from local stations were slowly gathered into a train which set off westwards; nobody knew where they were going. At last they went through the Severn Tunnel and along the South Wales coast with carriages being dropped off at various places on the way. It was late at night when they arrived.

The Log also records that 10 of the London evacuees left the school for Crediton in Devon on 3rd August and a further 4 children went to other places to stay with relatives or friends. Presumably the delay in sending the London children away was the need to consult their families or local authorities. The V2 rocket attacks which started in September 1944, and were directed against the London area, did not affect Sussex so the children were able to return. The Log shows 3 of the local children returning to Danehill School on 6th November and all but 2 of the rest on 18th December in time for Christmas at home.

The end of the war was now in sight. In February 1945 the Wardens Post in The Orange Tea Rooms was closed and transferred to Tanyard Farm, the home of Lt. Col. Clementi-Smith. In April it was reported that Danehill had returned to store: 169 helmets of the 183 issued, 18 eye shades (anti-gas) of 188 issued, and 8 whistles of 13 issued. The report also mentions that 13 stirrup pumps had been issued to Danehill but did not say if any were returned. About this time the dustmen were asked to collect any respirators the public wished to dispose of.

The Civil Defence was stood down on 2nd May 1945, Germany surrendered on the 7th, with VE Day being celebrated on the 8th.



VE DAY BEING CELEBRATED AT THE "RED LION", CHELWOOD GATE.

The war with Japan was to continue, however, until their formal surrender on 2nd September 1945, following the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on 6th & 9th August, and the acceptance of Allied terms on the 14th VJ Day was celebrated on 15th August 1945.

One aspect of the peace with Germany, was the difficulty of returning to their homes some of the men held as prisoners of war owing to the changes in national boundaries in Eastern Europe and the chaos and destruction of the final battles. A number of such men were housed at Chapelwood Manor on the road to Nutley. From there many of them would go out every day to work on the local farms or at other occupations. One in particular, a blacksmith, walked down each morning to Mr. Etherton's forge in Danehill. A good worker, he was soon befriended by the family and repaid their kindness in virtually the only way open to him by making wooden toys for Mr. & Mrs. Etherton's grandchildren. He remained at Chapelwood Manor, coming each day to Danehill, for almost 3 years before returning to Germany. Other prisoners also repaid their employers and friends in a similar fashion or sold toys to earn some pocket money.

On the home front, the shortages and rationing went on for some year, and it took many months to bring back and demobilise all those who had served away from home in the armed forces and many other spheres.