

Wartime West Sussex 1939 - 1945 WOMEN AT WAR - VOLUNTEER WORK

AFS and Civil Defence in Horsham

From *Memories from a town that disappeared, Horsham during World War II*
(Horsham Museum, 1989)

By Mrs. V. Honey

Because I worked at Rice Brothers (the garage) I was in a "reserved occupation" and spent the years typing estimates - 5 copies - for repairing Army vehicles.....At first I was in the A.F.S. which meant that I was on call for the local fire station - and had to dash up there every time the siren sounded. I remember the first time it went in the night and I hastily dressed and rushed over to Park House (the home of the fire station then) my heart pounding with fear that I might be bombed at any moment. During the day, at work, I also had to dash off, as did our tyre fitter, who was second in command of the fire brigade, but fortunately we never had a real incident, only the sirens sounding as enemy planes went over Horsham on their way to London. Soon the A.F.S. became the National Fire Service, and then I had to go into Civil Defence to do duty on a rota - and I had a proper uniform. I had to go over to Park House and the headquarters were underneath, in the cellars. Usually my friend and I would settle down to sleep and hope that the sirens would not go. I remember that in August 1940 I was a bridesmaid at my friend's wedding in the Methodist Church, and as we came out of the church the sirens went - off I went to the Fire Station in all my finery.

My friends and I helped out at the YMCA canteen, and every night we went there 7pm - 10pm and helped to dish up dozens and dozens of meals for troops stationed in and around the town. Often I would be on washing-up duty for the 3 hours, which may account for the fact that washing up has never bothered me since then.....

Father was a sergeant in the Special Constables and had to patrol the town of an evening, with another old trader. Mother did her bit by allowing soldiers to come to the house to have a bath, how they blessed us for this luxury, and she too did a turn at the church canteen which was run in what is now the Salvation Army hall in Barttelot Road. I wrote dozens of letters to local lads who were scattered far and wide - and sent little parcels when I could.

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By 'A lady married and living in Horsham throughout the war'

I was pretty busy with four children and my mother living with me, but I went out to help in a canteen two evenings a week. One was for the Observer Corps and the other was an army one. When we cleaned up all the tables after the customers had gone, if you ran your hand along underneath you collected huge lumps of chewing gum, which was quite horrible. I used to get there on my bike, and the lights were dim and shaded like those on cars. There were very few people about, and it wasn't dangerous to go about alone at night at that time.

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