

Wartime West Sussex 1939 – 1945

D-DAY

Remembering D-Day in Wittering

From Wittering's War, Reminiscences of village life during World War II (East Wittering Local History Group, 2004)

THE WEEKS BEFORE D-DAY by Neil Theobald

The build up to D-Day was heralded by the increase in the number of soldiers and vehicles arriving in the village. At the time, we were not aware of what was going on; we thought it to be just another exercise. There were tanks, Bren gun carriers, Lorries, jeeps and DUKWS everywhere. Field kitchens sprang up all over the place, one in the garage next door to Ivan Toledo's mother in Barn Road (Barn Cottage). There was another on part of Church Farm. The one thing I remember about these kitchens was being fed by the soldiers and in particular, the tinned peaches. These were unheard of at home at that time, like so many other favourites. If it wasn't for "poor man's pheasant" (rabbit), we would have gone hungry. So we were very fortunate to get our hands on such treats. We were given rides in the jeeps and DUKWS when the officers weren't around. One DUKW crew seemed to adopt us and we had some happy times with them, with us sitting in the driving seat and having the full run of it. I often wonder what happened to these men when the raid on France took place; I just hope they made it. And then one morning we went out to see them and they had gone. In fact everything had vanished overnight and we never saw these brave men again. All this had been in readiness for D-Day, although we were not aware of this at the time.

WHAT'S COOKING? By Shirley Salter

It was the morning of 6th June 1944. It was a day like any other school day at first – getting up early to catch the bus for school. I was a pupil at West Wittering Parochial School, but on this particular day the Senior Girls were going to Chichester to the Girls Lancastrian School for cookery lessons and the Senior Boys to the Boys School for woodwork.

I suppose (but I'm not clear on this) that the news had been on the wireless, but I don't recall that we were told of any great event, but sitting on the top deck of that Southdown bus trundling into Chichester, we were all greatly puzzled and excitedly curious as we passed the temporary military airfield at Appledram, behind the Black Horse, to see rows of aeroplanes with the most extraordinary paint work – stripes around the fuselage and on the wings - such as we had never seen before. There was much conjecture as to what it could mean and there was plenty of activity, too. We carried on to Chichester and when our cookery class was over, it was back on the bus to West Wittering School. There did seem to be a great 'buzz' in the air, but it was not until afternoon roll call that the Head announced that our troops had made that initial landing in France, and prayers were said for their safety. I'm sure no more work was done that day, and when school was let out at 3.30pm, every child made a rush for home to listen to the news on the wireless and to hear what their parents had to say!

We realised the significance of what we had seen that morning, of the aircraft at Appledram; all the planes taking part in that wonderful plan had been painted in similar fashion and kept under wraps until that great day.

There had to be, in the following year, many tragedies and sorrow and joy as the Allied armies spread across the continent, liberating the oppressed and destroying the Nazi machine. There were many heroic stories to be told. Everyone has their own memories and these are mine, those of a young girl at the beginning of adult life. Now I am older and look back, all these things are blurred and I may have seen them differently to others. If I am wrong, I apologise, but this is my view and I am grateful to all those men and women who gave me and my family, and the children who were to follow, a chance to live in peace. I hope and pray it will be so evermore, despite the times we now live in.