

Wartime West Sussex 1939 – 1945 VE DAY and VJ DAY

Remembering VE Day in Wittering

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By Laurie Crisp

"WHEN THE LIGHTS COME ON AGAIN ..."

Late on the evening of Monday, 7th May, my mother woke me and my youngest sister and said, with a joyful tear in her eye, "The war is over – Germany has surrendered". For the rest of that night I did not sleep a wink and, when morning came, I was up early to meet Dave Sharp, my cousin Jimmy Steel, Mick Hoskins and several of our gang on The Parade. It was a bright, sunny morning befitting such a day. One of the gang said that his dad reckoned we should celebrate our troops' Victory in Europe by building a large bonfire.

What an idea! Our enthusiasm was such that within minutes it was decided that the most 'humungous' bonfire would be built on the waste ground opposite The Parade, between Admiralty Row and Shrubbs' old Dairy – a fitting place as it had been the site of many of our imaginary battles, our sports ground and a place to hang out through the last four years of our childhood. So spontaneous was our enthusiasm that within a short time children from Russell Road, from Shoreside Walk, Marine Drive, from Stocks Lane and Church Road – from all over the area, appeared with any hand wheeled vehicle they could lay their hands on: prams, carts, carrier cycles, pushchairs – anything that would carry the waste that would build 'our fire'. And we all set out, armed with our dads' best saws and our mums' kindling choppers to collect the fuel we required.

By 8 o'clock that evening, it seemed that the whole village stood around our bonfire, which was some twenty feet high (or so it seemed!) and was lit with a huge cheer. Later we stood by the dying embers and I remember a man dressed in the uniform of an officer stepping forward and with a Verrey pistol firing three red flares into the night sky, to the applause of us all.

With the last dying embers of the bonfire and the end of a most exciting day, I remember climbing the stairs to bed and halting on the landing. Through the window I could see that every household, for miles around, had its lights on – visible for the first time since the blackout of 1939!

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