

Wartime West Sussex 1939 - 1945

ON THE HOME FRONT - DAILY LIFE

Wartime life in Worthing [Ten pages]

Extracts from: *Despatches from the Home Front, The War Diaries of Joan Strange 1939-1945* (Monarch Publications, 1989)

1939

August 29th Still lovely weather, bathed at 1pm and 10pm!

Many notes passing between British Cabinet and Hitler – we really feel war will be averted although preparations are still going on.

Worthing museum had a large van outside – presumably removing the treasures!

Sugar is very scarce and people are making their houses light proof.

September 6th The first week of the war – it has been impossible to write daily for the last week as life has suddenly become very difficult under wartime conditions. Very few people felt this terrible blow would fall and right up to Sunday morning (September 3rd) there was a glimmer of hope. On Friday the Germans 'crossed the frontiers to resist the Poles' and the newspapers immediately declared 'war begins'. Everyone's spirits sank but rose again when Mr Chamberlain gave Hitler one more chance in a message sent on Saturday with a time limit up at eleven o'clock on Sunday morning. In the meantime the 'blackouts' have started, no one must show a glimmer of light anywhere. Cars have the merest glimmer left and have to be painted white in front, rear and on running boards – the roads have a white centre line and the kerbs whitened. Some food especially sugar is very scarce. Worthing, being a safe zone, has had over 10,000 evacuees from London billeted on the inhabitants. On Saturday afternoon Schofield and I helped billet some Bermondsey blind people.

September 23rd Mother slipped and fell (thanks to old Hitler and the blackout) and broke her collarbone. Petrol rationing really in this week and I've not had my extra ration allowance yet.

September 25th Received my extra grant of nine gallons per month of petrol.

September 26th Mother's arm seems much less painful. She had a lot of visitors (sixteen to tea!) plus flowers and sweets and Uncle Bert came for piquet in the evening while I and four 'enemy aliens'! walked to Bache's and spent the evening there. Lovely moon so no difficulty about getting there.

The war budget! 2/-increase on income tax.

September 28th A glorious autumn morning. Everyone is talking about the income tax but is taking it very calmly, 7/6d in the pound!

October 14th Mother and I set forth for our belated 'summer' holiday! By dint of cycling for my work I've saved some petrol for the trip to Aunt Anne's at Cheltenham. I get only fourteen gallons a month.

October 16th A lovely day. Shopped and coffee'd in the morning. Cheltenham very dull full of 'vacks' and the shops full of all the usual ARP goods. One gets

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sick of looking at black stuff, gas mask cases, buckets and shovels (for removing incendiary bombs), low powered bulbs, black shades, etc. The buses' windows are all blued over and give one a sick feeling whilst travelling. Heard at four o'clock the wireless message that German bombers had attacked the Firth of Forth but missed the Forth Bridge. Four German planes were brought down. The *first* air raid on Britain.

November 2nd Nearly got summonsed for not blacking out my room but got let off with a 'caution'!

1940

January 8th The 'marg and marm' breakfast of the last war now begins again!

January 13th To Brighton in the afternoon to the Symphony concert, but owing to the war Orloff – the soloist – was not able to reach England in time. I suppose he's in the USA. Got into the car – the four of us – and blow me if the one headlight allowed would not light up! *Impossible* to drive in the dark with only the side lights so had to get it repaired.

January 17th Mother heard that her money which used to bring in 5% then 3½% is now 2%! Everyone is grumbling about their drop in income and no wonder and for what? Other direct effects of war are the rationing of food and petrol, increase of the cost of living (it's gone up 12½% at least), unemployment among certain trades, especially among building and flower growing concerns in Worthing. Then we hear of Russians dying of cold by the hundreds, sailors being mined and torpedoed, airmen suffering big casualties.....

January 26th The bacon ration is to be doubled! Still no maid but I quite enjoy doing the early tea and breakfast.

January 29th Left car at Station Garage because my new bumper has come. The man told me that I was liable to a fine of £100 or three months in prison if I drove in the blackout without a whitened bumper and sides of running boards!

April 17th I to Tennis Club Annual General Meeting. Only four 'men' there – one over seventy, one under eighteen, Mr Sams (over military age) and Mr Cushing (medically unfit). Home at 8.30. Mr Ritter and Mrs Langbank here and we played rummy.

April 18th All newspapers are much smaller these days. For the last three days there have been no photos in the *Telegraph*.

April 23rd The war budget announced today. Increases on tobacco, beer and spirits and postage and telephones. Letters now 2½d and postcards 2d from May 1st!

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May 9th Mr Chamberlain retained his government's majority by 281 to 200 votes – fairly close. It was a very stormy debate. Will he go? A glorious day and up to tennis.

Things are getting dearer. Mother bought some tea cloths today – 2/6d! instead of 1/3d. Tennis balls are 8/-a half dozen.

May 13th Whit Monday. A perfect day for weather – most tantalising for banks and shops as the government has asked them to keep open. This is to ensure people keeping to their own towns and leaving the railways for military and other transport. We were stopped twice on the road back from Arundel by soldiers. Parachute troops are the great bug-bear now.

May 22nd I obeyed all orders today and took my gas mask, identity card, identity disc and removed my distributor business in car! Such is life!

May 28th All the bathing huts have been trundled off the beach, filled with stones and put to block roads leading up from the sea! All boats have been removed from the beach and no bathing is allowed.

June 1st Saturday. Up to tennis and quite a lot there. Very few go up during the week as many are working with the ARP or Observer Corps or 'digging for victory', etc. Everyone pretends not to be nervous but we can't resist noticing the aeroplanes very carefully and it is good to see the familiar RAF circles on the wings.

June 28th From today onwards all cars must be rendered incapable of being driven away, i.e. when I stopped at each patient this morning and afternoon I had to remove ignition keys and lock doors. At night I must still continue to remove rotary gadget as well!

July 31st A real hot day – got my first bathe in at last. Soldiers come and clear the beaches of people at 6pm punctually.

October 14th A very sad letter from Uncle Alfred at Eastbourne who's got the printing works there. The town has lost two-thirds of its population thanks to numerous awful air raids and he is faced with ruin.

December 12th Uncle Bert, my godfather and formerly Father's business partner, got knocked down by an army lorry and is pretty extensively hurt – the young lorry drivers are very reckless. In December 1939 alone there were nearly 1,200 road deaths.

1941

January 18th The net seems to be closing around Mussolini! He is being beaten all over Africa and in Albania and all danger of Egypt being invaded is over...The Worthing Old Girl's party was quite good fun – it started at 3.45 and owing to their being no black out in the hall it stopped soon after six o'clock. Miss Reid, who took over as head mistress from Miss Kate Coast in 1938, made a very good

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speech reviewing the school's activities during the past very trying war year. She said how comparatively calmly the girls reacted to shelter life and other wartime restrictions. Like everyone else they are to be thoroughly trained in fire fighting. A very vile wet-snowy day.

February 23rd Worthing made £590,000 during its War Weapons Week! Barbed wire is springing up all over the place in the town. It must be very difficult for all the blind people here. The front is absolutely blocked by terrific quantities of it.

April 6th Germany has invaded Jugoslavia and Greece but both countries are standing firm. Sir Kingsley Wood, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, has brought in the budget and income tax has gone up to 10/- in the pound – terrific. He looks so benign too! Mother's made a sweet little smock to be raffled in aid of funds for Mrs Sangster's 'Bombed-out Working Party'.

July 5th I went up to London for a Chartered Society of Massage and Medical Gymnastics meeting and a lecture. Kit met me for lunch and afterwards we cycled miles through London streets. A glorious day and the population looked much better than three months ago. In Hyde Park there is a central dump for rubble, etc – it's a young mountain with a road over it. I wonder how many houses have helped make it – thousands? Next to the mountain were the bowlers playing hard! Hundreds were bathing in the Serpentine and allotments abound everywhere! I bought some tennis balls (they are *very* scarce) at 19/6d a dozen! We called on Aunt Dot, Mother's younger sister – she is a doctor and going to the big RAF hospital at East Grinstead working on burns. I forgot to take my gas mask and identity card and two policemen were on the barrier at Worthing Station when I got back but they let me through when I showed them my National Savings card which had my address on it.

1942

August 3rd Bank Holiday Monday and as usual a showery one. Everyone has been asked to make it a stay-at-home holiday. As there is no private petrol the roads are very quiet. Busses are very full, trains are restricted.

August 10th We went to bed earlier yesterday to save fuel but just before 11pm we had an 'alert'...

August 12th Harold Frampton brought me two gorgeous bunches of grapes for my birthday – muscats. They are 15/- a pound in the shops! Mother gave me two pairs of gloves – *four coupons!* I saw Dr Marjorie Davies outside her house that had been bombed – she was salvaging things.

August 14th ...The entire stock of iron railings and gates in Worthing is being removed. We shall soon become accustomed to the sight. Apparently the whole of Britain is being de-ironed!

August 21st Mother and I started our holiday. Mother trained and I cycled up to Mollie's. At Dunsfold I could scarcely recognise the scene as there is a

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tremendous bomber aerodrome in process of being built. My cyclometer went wrong and only registered twenty miles instead of thirty-three.....It was a great effort getting ready for a wartime holiday. In addition to the usual arrangements to be made about patients etc I had to fix up a deputy at the Report Centre, two canteens and firewatchers. Then we had to tell the warden we should be away and tell him our key was at Mr Tyler's. We turned off water, gas and electricity and only half drew the curtains to enable ARP wardens to look inside in case of incendiary bomb trouble. I got 'emergency' food cards for two weeks and arranged for our paper the *Telegraph* to be delivered to our neighbours, the Shepherds at 25 Langton Road – if you cancel the delivery altogether it's impossible to get it again when you return. We brought our soap ration with us.

August 26th On holiday at Mollie's at Godalming. Having bought a mac cycling cape (six coupons) I set off for Oxford at about 10 o'clock and arrived there at five o'clock. The weather cleared! The roads are very clear except for army, air force and navy lorries.

September 1st I cycled eighty miles to Winchester, arriving at 7.30 in the rain! I was glad of my six-coupon mac cape. It was a lovely ride; I used an AA map and did not miss my way at all. I stopped at Swindon and asked if there was a 'British Restaurant' there and was surprised not to find one. I had difficulty in finding anywhere for a cup of tea, rather different from peace days when you see 'Teas' up everywhere! I eventually got a cup at a 'Pull-in' for lorries drivers! A rabbit sandwich, cake and tea all for 6d! The only travellers are all lorry drivers.

October 11th Helen has been ill today and has decided that she will not have her baby in April. The doctors put it down to the bombing in Worthing last Wednesday week. Her boys and I went up to the allotment this morning and dug up carrots and potatoes. They loved doing it and we all got a good crop. We only have a three-hour daily maid now. Resident maids are almost non-existent – many people have daily women plus babies! Mrs Haigh looks after her maid's baby while the maid does the housework!

October 31st The ban on central heating has ended. We had our first coal fire two days ago. All car owners with cars laid up are to fill up a form giving details of their tyres. There will be a big round up of rubber soon we imagine. Worthing has had a 'non-ferrous' metal drive for a week. I took some decrepit coffee pots to the centre. We have a lot of collecting receptacles in the scullery now: one for waste paper and cardboard, one for pig food, one for compost, a jar of milk tops metal, bones, a jar of cheese rind etc for Ken's hens and so on! Our egg ration is down to one a month. As we are registered with Mollie we do get more if her hens do their job well! They are mostly given to invalids who find the restrictions very hard. *Fuel* is a great topic – BBC give 'fuel flashes' – ways of economising. Everyone is asked to have no more than five inches of hot water in the bath. Bread is a grey colour, because of the flour. We are advised not to make Christmas puddings till much nearer to Christmas as they get mouldy quickly. The few advertisements on hoardings advise us to 'Save more and lend it to the Government' and 'Less shopping means more shipping for vital supplies'.

November 5th Firework Day and great news from Egypt. I came downstairs at 7.15 and the paper arrived soon after. The headlines: 'Axis Forces In Full Retreat'

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– official! I dashed upstairs and Mother and I both read the details. Already over 9,000 prisoners have been taken; half Rommel's tanks have been destroyed. It's been a real wet November day – raining the whole time but no one has minded! One of my patients coming off night duty as an ambulance driver dropped into her butcher's and he was so excited 'he even offered me a marrow bone if I'd anything I could take it home in'. She said she'd got her tin hat! We can't help feeling this is the beginning of big things.

November 6th I went to the YMCA canteen this evening as usual and coming home saw a lovely search light display. It quite lit up the blackout which this week is very black. I lost my way last night after leaving the Girl's High School!

December 25th ... Here in Worthing a quietish Christmas. Mrs Wenban-Smith brought her eighty-eight-year-old mother and her two Australian airmen on Christmas evening and we had a jolly evening. Supper was quite a spread. I'd managed to queue up and get a few apples on Christmas Eve and I swapped three preserved eggs for three oranges with a patient! A lovely box of chocolates arrived from Mr Durst in America (he is one of the Jewish refugees who was here in 1939) on Christmas morning. We visited Mr Wheatland on the front – although the sentry had been told to expect us he wanted to see identity cards and we were all counted through the barrier. There was an awful lot of barbed wire so it was good that there was a moon. Our red rear lights on our bikes looked rather effective.

1943

January 3rd... Today the bus restrictions come into force in Worthing – no buses run on Sundays until 1pm and all buses stop at 9pm in the future. This will make a lot of difference to cinemas, church etc.

January 9th Mother and I took the boys to the pantomime this afternoon. It was quite good. The funny man made some remark about the war being on this time next year. In Roger's prayers tonight he made an impromptu one: "Please God, let the war stop earlier than the man said in the show, or if not earlier, only a bit later"! Mollie says he often makes up one about the war according to the latest news!

February 18th... Florists are protesting against the ban on sending flowers by rail or post which came into force yesterday. A florist said that he had been receiving many cables from the USA and Canada ordering flowers to be sent to Canadians wounded at Dieppe and now in hospital. They will have to stop. The papers reported there were no flower sellers outside the hospitals yesterday and no "lovely violets" at Piccadilly Circus.

February 22nd There was a mine explosion again today. Later we heard a dog was the cause of it. The dog and the mine are no more.

April 12th Sir Kingsley Wood brought in his budget yesterday. There are higher taxes on beer, tobacco, wines, entertainments and non-essential goods such as jewellery. Mrs Wenban-Smith is feeling very sad as her Australian airman Arthur is missing after a big raid on the Ruhr.

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April 26th Kit cycled down from London for the Easter weekend. The public is asked not to use the railways if possible. She stopped at Lou's on the way to collect a *lemon!* A soldier bought Lou six and as they are absolutely unobtainable she thought we might like to raffle one for some cause. A lovely Easter Day – sunny and warm.... We had two visitors to supper and we opened a tin of salmon – twenty four points gone west!

April 27th ... A wartime advertisement states that a million and a half pounds of rubber go on every 1,000 bomber raid, 176lb go into a tank and 6lb are needed to equip a commando. Rubber is vitally important for our offensive this year; but the enemy holds 90% of the world's natural rubber resources...more rubber must be salvaged.

June 20th The King is still away visiting the troops in North Africa and calling in on Malta. I had a game of tennis up at the club. It's the first time I've played there for three years. The place looked awful – only two courts are usable, weeds are everywhere, the ARP have two huts there, allotments have been dug on the car park. The Working Men's Club, which was bombed, now uses the pavilion. The balls were awful and the net very bad – tennis under wartime conditions!

July 12th Alas! A bobby knocked us up at 1.45am as I'd forgotten to switch off the kitchen light! It will be a £2 fine I'm afraid. Blow.

August 1st Bank Holiday weekend. Despite newspaper and radio warnings against travelling, thousands have tried to get away for a bit of a break, some standing in railway queues all night long. On arrival at coastal districts accommodation and food have not been sufficient. Moral "Stay at Home".

August 9th We heard today that parts of the South Coast are to be banned again from next Saturday. It is to extend from Newhaven to Lancing and people travelling from Worthing into the banned area are to have permits. Cycling along to Lancing to the cinema will be prohibited. There are thousands of troops all along the coast – Canadian tank troops and British commandos. The continent is seething everywhere and occupied Europe awaits the call of liberation.

October 3rd Richard is five today. It seems much longer than five years since Mr Chamberlain flew to Munich to "appease" Hitler. Helen made quite a decent looking wartime birthday cake with some chocolate icing. We found difficulty in finding birthday presents as toys are almost impossible to procure. The policeman at the Report Centre is making a wooden train set for me but it is not quite finished. Ken bought a second hand clockwork train from one of his pupils – a great triumph!

Christmas Day 1943 The quietest one we've ever had! Our dinner consisted of liver (from rabbit Harold Frampton gave us) and bacon, greens and potatoes and stewed fruit! We had it in the kitchen early then set off to see a good horse film at the Odeon *My Friend Flicka*. We've been asked not to use the telephone over the holiday so we've not used it as we usually do.

December 31st At the YMCA some of the men were rather "jolly" tonight – one merchant navy boy we found still asleep in the writing room at 10.30. He'd been there since 3pm! He'd not had a drop for seven months while on board, and does not think he'll have any more ever!

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1944

January 15th Our milk boy told us today that we shall get milk on five days only for a bit – a pint each delivery. I feel sure great stocks of food and other commodities are being rapidly stored for liberated Europe. There's very little dried fruit, dried milk, leather etc. Some time ago the newspapers reported that there would be at least one lb of oranges for everyone in Britain. Now one ship has been blown up by delayed action bombs probably placed by Spanish Nazi agents, and the other has got to be thoroughly searched and all the fruit may be ruined. A small item but typical of the times.

January 25th Mother phoned me at the Report Centre at 8pm to say 'could I find a night nurse for Mrs Harris?' (my ninety-five-year-old patient). With great difficulty I did but then could get no taxi. I had to leave the centre to act as taxi driver. It seems that all taxi people are on their last week of their petrol allowance and have none except for their regular customers. I pleaded that it was a case of life and death but with no success.

January 26th I had to be taxi driver again tonight but the blackout was horrid and I had to take Uncle Bert with an extra torch to light up the kerbstone. The Argentine has at last broken with the Axis. The siege of Leningrad is at an end.

May 28th Some typical wartime sights: (1) You never see a woman without a shopping basket. (2) Many Grannies push the grandchildren out while Mother works. If a Mother pushes the child herself she is very young. (3) Very many bicycles. (4) Paving stone kerbs and walls often broken down by heavy tanks. (5) Early morning queues at confectioners. If there are no queues it means the cakes are poor. (6) Greengrocers' shops are very dull – no fruit usually. (7) Marked civility shown to milkmen and butchers. (8) Numerous lorries, tanks, etc in private roads.

June 18th Kit phoned to say she couldn't possibly come for her godson's christening. She said the night had been 'unspeakable' which for Kit is very strong. Simon was duly christened at Tarring Church today and we had a nice tea later – no godparents could come so I had to be the proxy. We've gone back to 1940 days again. Preparing for the night is quite a performance. Gas turned off at main. Tea tray ready, chairs, knitting and books in hall, suitcase packed with spare clothes and money! Nevertheless all news is good from the war fronts and many of these pilotless planes are being shot into the sea before they reach us. Our English Channel is a great boon.

July 11th The bacon ration is to be increased from 4oz to 6oz a week each! Stalin announces still another offensive. The Times says there is no doubt that the Russians will be in Germany first and that in a few days probably.

September 6th In Worthing, corporation workmen are getting all the street lamps into working order. The blackout is to be lifted after five years on September 7th – Mother has already scraped off some of the black paper strips! Holidaymakers are making the most of the lifting of the travel ban – Worthing is very full indeed.

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September 16th I took the boys on the beach at East Worthing today. It was my first visit to the beach since May 1940. There were crowds of people there. Tonight we put the clocks back an hour and tomorrow we have 'dim-out' instead of 'blackout' conditions. Curtains must be drawn but suffused light is allowed. There is to be modified street lighting too.

October 8th I went out early to collect the bread and meat – a joint of lamb this week (the usual 1/2d amount per person) but on it there was enough suet for two puddings! Meat has been rather scarce this week as we have a good many commandos in town and they are allowed double the civilian ration. I managed to get half lb of liver though (offal – not rations). I got a jam sandwich at the baker's. They waited till the other customer had gone out as they'd told her they had no cakes – they keep them for their bread customers only! The cheese ration is up to 3oz a week next week instead of 2oz but milk is still very short. Twice a week we get half a pint which does not go far especially if visitors come to tea. Golden syrup is very difficult again. I bought a pair of 'utility' gloves 11/- plus three coupons, two pairs of winter underwear 5/3d and 4/9d plus six coupons and a length of dress material at 8/9d a yard. No paper is allowed to wrap things with and everyone takes a basket or a string bag. We've had no coal for a week and there is talk of another strike. Ivy came to tea and spent the evening with us recently – she brought away with her two bags – one containing bones (for the bone bin) and the other containing six biscuits. Unfortunately she absent-mindedly put the biscuits in the bin and brought us the bones!

October 18th The weather is simply awful, terrific gales and downpours – the worst October weather for forty years. The Minister of Food, Colonel Llewellyn, said in the Commons yesterday: 'At Christmas we think first of the children and everyone between the ages of six months and eighteen shall be entitled to an extra ration of half a pound of sweets this year.' He also announced that 80,000,000 packets of Iraqi dates totalling 9,000 tons will be sold at 3d a packet and one point. These dates were prepacked for the forces and are no longer required.

October 30th Worthing is shedding her battle dress and gradually returning back to normality. The deep ditches to trap tanks that criss-cross the Downs and the valley behind the town are being filled in. The Worthing Herald says that in its editorial view growing cabbages on the Manor County Cricket Ground was a panic measure that should never have been permitted.

November 17th We were very quiet at the YMCA tonight. It was nice to have a real milky cup of coffee-Hough, civilians only get two pints of milk now. Chemists are short of quite a lot of things too. I went into Astons to exchange a 3/- elastoplast and I said I'd have 3/- worth of Dettol – unobtainable. Then I'll have a toothbrush – unobtainable! Saccharines – nil. Quinine – nil and so on. Couldn't seem to think of anything they'd got, so took some other antiseptic and some change!

1945

January 1st Little did I think I should still be writing in this book when I bought it last September... However things do seem to be hastening to the end of the war. Only once a month now to the Report Centre, instead of once a week- good! Lemons

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are on sale in the town and the last of the barbed wire on the Worthing Parade is being removed by soldiers. It's been there for more than four years and looks very rusty. The cold spell has ended.

January 21st Mrs Wenban-Smith has sown up her air-raid shelter wood supports as there is no coal. Another difficulty: owing to having to expend five coupons on a pair of shoes everyone has their foot gear mended until the end. I shot into Watts today to retrieve a pair and to leave behind those I was wearing! I had to queue up! Watts had over 500 pairs brought in last week. Unfortunately I queued behind a woman who had taken six pairs and each pair had to be ticketed separately! Shopping is difficult. So far newspapers are delivered in this road but many people have to collect theirs. The Burma Road had been re-opened.

January 30th The cold has been intense in Britain too. We ran out of fuel four days ago and I had to accept offers of logs and a bucket of coal from patients! We swapped the logs for two eggs and a packet of mixed fruit from Australia! Ivy got frozen out of her flat and came here. We phoned the coal merchant and explained our plight and the girl said if I could go to the coal dump with two sacks I could collect the stuff – which I did with speed.

March 6th The lifting of wartime restrictions continues in Worthing: corporation workmen are helping sappers remove the beach mines near the pier, the Town Hall clock is now illuminated, concrete anti-invasion devices are being smashed up. The chief difficulties are the scarcity of fuel, queuing for fish etc, lack of good domestic help, lack of accommodation – all hotels are booked up fully for months ahead and some have dismissed their 'permanent' guests even, to make room for more. The ration of fat is rather small and people try all sorts of dodges like using liquid paraffin for cake making – quite good too – and some choc and sweet shops have much short supplies they only open so many days a week and shut early. MPs have found that housing is of greater concern to their constituents than any other post-war problem.

April 2nd We had the first weather report on the wireless tonight since August 1939! Worthing is packed for the first Easter since then too!

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