West Sussex at War
1939 - 1945

by
Kim Leslie & Alan Readman

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COUNTY COUNCIL
SUNDAY 3 SEPTEMBER 1939

Sunday was a brilliant summer's day as the congregation arrived for morning service at St. Peter's, Linchmere, near Midhurst. They were slightly earlier this week. The vicar's wireless had been taken into the little church and as the choir filled the stalls was switched on for Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain speaking from Downing Street. The ultimatum served on Germany to withdraw from Poland had just expired at 11 o'clock: '...consequently this country is at war with Germany....'.

At nearby Tillington, diarist William Mitford anticipated the worst: 'It is I feel the end of life as we know it'.

 Barely had the broadcast finished when the newly installed sirens wailed their first warning of an air raid. In Crawley a lone policeman cycled up the London Road ordering everyone indoors. But all stayed quiet. It was the first of many false alarms.

READY FOR WAR

Increasing tension in Europe had given plenty of time to prepare for war. Centres issuing gas masks had been open for a year now. Fear of aerial attack ensured that Air Raid Precautions - ARP - was one of the first defences to be organised by local councils. Air raid wardens had to enforce blackout regulations. There was a huge demand for blinds and blackout paper. Crawley shops sold out completely. Vehicle and cycle lamps had to be hooded. Air raid shelters were built for communal use and householders built Anderson shelters in their gardens.

Convoys of coaches and Southdown buses took them to reception and billeting centres where they were taken to their new homes. Most were received with open arms. Mrs. Bridge of Birdham with seven children of her own took in eleven evacuees. Meeting the Queen on her West Sussex visit in December 1939 she said she coped by getting up at 5 and being organised! They missed their parents, but these were happy days for many. One little girl wrote home: 'I like it all right. I will stay here till I get married.'

But there were some real problems. In schools insufficient accommodation meant shift systems had to operate. Many children found it hard to settle and were ill at ease with their new families. One family got home to find their evacuees had plucked the pet parrot! Heyshott Women's Institute was so concerned at all the problems that they sent a resolution to the National Federation suggesting the building of properly constructed camps and the taking over of large empty houses to relieve the distressed householders.

FRIENDLY INVASION BY ARMY OF CHILDREN

Just before the outbreak of war, thousands of evacuees began to arrive in West Sussex to escape the feared bombing of London. By the end of September 1939 nearly 42,000 had come: mothers and babies, children and their teachers. Later they also poured in from blitz-torn Portsmouth and Southampton.

They arrived at railheads around West Sussex. At Chichester 13,000 children and adults were received in the first three days of September. At Worthing, 12,000. The West Sussex Gazette reported pathetic scenes at Chichester of 'forlorn little folk, with their poor little emergency bundles of clothing and gas masks...There were many wet eyes.' At Worthing they were each given a carrier bag with two days' food - chocolate, corned beef, condensed milk and biscuits.

Evacuees arrive at Billingshurst, 1 September 1939

A taste of the countryside
Dad's Army
The landing of German troops by parachute into Holland and Belgium stood as a dire warning of what might happen in Britain. On 14 May 1940 Anthony Eden appealed over the wireless for local defence volunteers. The rush to enrol was staggering. Worthing's first applicant reported only minutes after the broadcast and by 17 May well over one thousand had joined up in this one town alone.

Twenty-six Home Guard battalions were raised in Sussex. Ready for the invader, they patrolled the coast and countryside - at Worthing a mounted patrol covered the South Downs - guarded strategic points such as bridges and railway lines, and attended bombing incidents and aircraft crashes.

Dragons' Teeth and Pillboxes
Hitler's plans to invade in 1940 were to take advantage of the flat West Sussex coastline for landing troops and tanks of the German 9th Army.

Anti-invasion measures were put in place all along the coast: mines, barbed wire, iron poles and barrage balloons protected the shoreline, guarded by machine gun pillboxes and anti-tank obstacles. From the coast the network of pillboxes followed strategic lines of communications up the Arun and Adur valleys - some still survive - and with the concrete dragons' teeth barriers formed stop-lines to prevent an inland advance. Part of the stop-line south of Crawley can still be seen in the dragons' teeth by the lane to Carters Lodge on the road between Lower Beeding and Handcross.
AIRFIELDS
West Sussex airfields played a crucial role in the air defence of southern England. The area south of London was covered by No. 11 Group, Fighter Command, and RAF Tangmere was the controlling station of sector 'A', an area stretching from Brighton to Bournemouth.

Tangmere is probably the most well-known Sussex airfield through its Battle of Britain role and links with the legendary Douglas Bader. Today its story is commemorated by its aviation museum and its poignant military graves. English and German airmen lie together in the village churchyard. Through Tangmere flew French Resistance undercover agents. Trained at nearby Bignor, near Petworth, they used Tangmere Cottage as their secret operations centre for many dramatic drops inside enemy-held territory.

Chichester was at the centre of one of the highest concentrations of military airfields in the country. As well as Tangmere there were stations at Westhampnett, Thorney Island, Merston and Ford, and temporary Advanced Landing Grounds at Apuldram, Bignor, Funtington and Selsey.

Coolham ALG, near Horsham, played its part in escorting air-tug glider combinations carrying airborne troops for D-Day. Similar escort duties were flown from Shoreham which also served as an air sea rescue base. Shoreham's D-Day aviation museum, surviving pill boxes, gun positions and gunnery training dome around the airfield, are vivid reminders of the air war along this coast. Air observation post airstrips were near East Grinstead - at Hammerwood - and in Parham Park, near Storrington. Part of Cowdray Park, Midhurst, was turned into an RN airfield as a repair and workshop satellite to Lee-on-Solent.

GARRISON COUNTY
Threat of invasion in the dark days of 1940 brought home the full impact of the army on local people. With his HQ at Wiston, near Steyning, Montgomery took command of the 3rd British Infantry Division to defend the Brighton-Bognor sector of the channel coast. Towns and villages were taken over by his billeting arrangements. Impatient at so many locals and evacuees in the beach areas - they hindered his plans - he demanded tight controls on all civilian movement and the demolition of any property in his way. Bungalow Town at Shoreham disappeared when residents were given 48 hours to leave before its wholesale destruction.

There was some relief when he withdrew and the Canadians took his place. They exercised with British troops and as the war progressed their training became less concerned with defence and more with the offensive that led up to D-Day.

From early 1944 the British and Canadians were joined by the Americans of the 30th U.S. Infantry in the Chichester-Bognor area. Maneuuvres were held in the South Downs Training Area and landing exercises on the beaches. The final D-Day invasion rehearsal - Exercise Fabius - took place at Bracklesham and Climbing.

Troops were massed throughout West Sussex for D-Day. The large estates and big houses were taken over. Amphibious tanks of the 27th Armoured Brigade were in Petworth Park and the 79th Armoured Division with its 'Hobart's Funnies' had its Advanced HQ at Barns Green, near Horsham.

Ammunition was stored in makeshift ordnance depots on remote downland farms, hidden in woods at Crabtree near Lower Beeding, and even in railway tunnels at Cocking and Singleton.

Left: Operations Room, Tangmere Sector, Bishop Otter College, Chichester

Left: RAF Ford

Canadian troops, Bracklesham, prior to the Dieppe raid, 1942

79th Armoured Division
This brochure is based on information and photographs held by the West Sussex Record Office in Chichester.

A summary of its Second World War records, and a bibliography about the war in the county, has been published by the West Sussex County Council in 1995:

*Local History Mini Guide No. 2: West Sussex at War, 1939-1945.*

Two other County Council publications are of related interest:

*D-Day West Sussex: Springboard for the Normandy Landings 1944*

by Ian Greig, Kim Leslie and Alan Readman (1994).

*The Royal Sussex Regiment: A Catalogue of Records*

by Alan Readman (1985).

The Record Office would like to add to its information about wartime West Sussex. If you are able to help with memories, photographs or documents please contact:

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VE Day tea party, Ringmer Road, Worthing