

West Sussex at War

1939 - 1945

by

Kim Leslie & Alan Readman

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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.

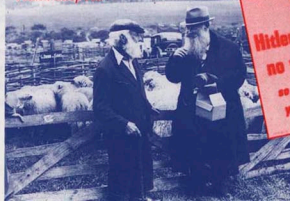
Filling sandbags, Bognor



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.

Findon Sheep Fair



**Hider will send
no warning -
so always carry
your gas mask**



Anderson shelter, Heyshott

EVACUATION OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN FROM LONDON, Etc.

FRIDAY 1st SEPTEMBER

Up and Down business trains as usual with few exceptions.

Main Line and Suburban services will be curtailed while evacuation is in progress during the day.

SATURDAY & SUNDAY

SEPTEMBER 2nd & 3rd

The train service will be exactly the same as on Friday.

Remember that there will be very few Down Midday business trains on Saturday.

SOUTHERN RAILWAY

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.

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.



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.



Above left:
Home Guard exercise,
Worthing

Above right:
Fittleworth
Home Guard

Left:
Selsey Home Guard



If the INVADER comes

WHAT TO DO — AND HOW TO DO IT

1
When Hitler and Stalin were united, the British Empire and the American Empire had combined in one front. It was to continue together until the end of the world. It was to be the greatest alliance in the history of the world. It was to be the greatest alliance in the world. It was to be the greatest alliance in the world. It was to be the greatest alliance in the world.

2
When a matter arises which the Government are not prepared to deal with, the people should be made to understand that the Government are not prepared to deal with it. The people should be made to understand that the Government are not prepared to deal with it. The people should be made to understand that the Government are not prepared to deal with it.

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Major front-line defences were the coastal batteries at Bognor, Littlehampton, Angmering-on-Sea, Worthing and Shoreham, mounted with 6 inch guns. Smaller anti-aircraft batteries also watched and waited. One on the greensward near the end of Broadmark Lane, Rustington, protected a flight path to Tangmere.

Huge radar towers were built at Poling, near Arundel, and a smaller installation put on the top of the Downs at Truleigh Hill, north of Shoreham, as part of the early warning radar chain across southern England.



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.

Ready for the invader, Bognor beach



Searchlights were manned by the 70th (Sussex) Searchlight Regiment Royal Artillery. One troop operated a cluster of six sites around Arundel: inland at Burpham, Madehurst, Tortington and Walberton, and on the coast at Bognor and Littlehampton.

Anti-aircraft battery, Rustington

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.



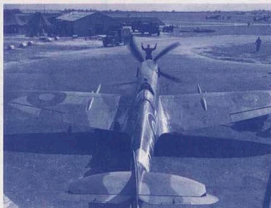
RAF Tangmere

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, Bognor, 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.

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



Left: RAF Ford

A community destroyed: Bungalow Town, Shoreham.

Only the church survived.

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.



Royal Ulster Rifles arrive in Bognor, 1940

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. Manoeuvres 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 Climping.

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.



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

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.



79th Armoured Division

THE HOME FRONT

Civil Defence was set up to protect the civilian population from enemy attack and to strengthen the ARP. Each local authority had its Civil Defence controller to direct this civilian army in its distinctive blue battle dress and beret, wardens, ambulance drivers, first aiders, decontamination and control staff. The nerve centre for West Sussex operated from the basement of County Hall in Chichester under County Controller Tom Hayward, Clerk of the County Council.

Fire services were strengthened by auxiliary fire service units. In 1941 all brigades were nationalised for greater flexibility and efficiency. West Sussex crews were drafted to London, Portsmouth and Southampton during the blitz.

Women's organisations played a vital role on the home front. The Women's Voluntary Service helped with the reception of evacuees, set up emergency canteens in public halls and mobile vans, and went to the aid of air raid victims. In Crawley they set up a system of street leaders so that each road had a housewife willing to help in any way. Townswomen's Guilds and the Women's Institutes also came to the rescue. The Horsham TWC organised clothes and shoes for the evacuees, and at Middleton, near Bognor, the WI ran a Monday meeting place for evacuated mothers.

The Women's Land Army made a vital contribution to food production, the girls who 'fought in the fields' a familiar sight in the countryside in their brown breeches and green jerseys. WLA honorary director, Lady Denman, made over her home at Balcombe Place, near Haywards Heath, as its national HQ. Within four years there were 1,300 Land Army girls in West Sussex.



Women's Land Army rally, Arundel Castle, 1943

The war effort needed vast increases in industrial production to meet the demands for weapons, tanks and aircraft. With so many men away in the armed forces, women took over in factories and workshops that turned over to war work. Gargers turned over to munitions, such as Baldoak's in Wivelsfield and Jones' in Belmont Street, Bognor. A most unusual scheme operated in Horsham where Rice's Springfield Road garage was taken over by the Patriotic Engineers to make millions of small parts for the Ministry of Aircraft Production. In the evening volunteers were encouraged to drop in for an hour or so after their normal day's work. Housewives at Harting turned out ten million special washers used by the navy in its ships. Longleys of Crawley were heavily engaged in national defence work. Two of their major West Sussex contracts were for the building of Poling radar station and RAF Merston.

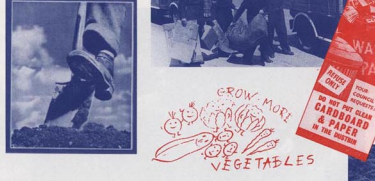


Above: Sampling 1940s makeshift canteens after an air raid

Left: Munitions workshop, Harrods garage, Fulbourn

Below: Waste paper salvage drive, Bognor

DIG FOR VICTORY



Food supplies were a big problem. Shops ran low, rationing was introduced and queuing became a way of life. In the countryside the WI encouraged the growing of home produce in the Dig for Victory campaign. At Looe, food growing gardens were turned over to fruit and vegetables in the drive for self-sufficiency. At Chichester the grass verges of the bypass were ploughed up for food production. Fruit Preservation Centres were set up, the Crawley Down Centre gaining the personal recognition of Lord Woolton, Minister of Food.



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26, EAST STREET (Phone 386), HORSHAM

Note that this map shows the post 1974 West Sussex County boundary



Land Army girls near Petworth

Longleys the builders: national defence work
Queen Victoria Hospital: plastic surgery pioneer work for war wounded

Key	
Airfields	✈️
Army Units (Major camps/HQ)	👤
Coastal Defence Batteries	🏰
Hospital/Medical Units	🏥
Prisoner of War Camps	🇬🇧

HELL LET LOOSE

On the home front nothing was to bring home the reality of the war in a more terrifying way than attack from the skies. Coastal towns like Bognor and Littlehampton suffered intensely. More than 2000 bombs were dropped on Littlehampton where more than a thousand houses were damaged. Bognor's tally included one flying bomb, incendiary bombs, oil bombs, parachute and sea mines. Selsey, thrust out to sea at the end of the Munhook Peninsula, suffered a tamping gale. Wartime diarist Lily Harris wrote of the nightmare of living here. On 19 August 1942, after five hours of dive-bombing, the village was 'like Hell let loose'.

According to police records the first air attack on West Sussex occurred at Wihorrough Green at 17.53 hours on 10 February 1940 when the village was machine gunned from the air. The first high explosive bomb to fall in the county was dropped on Cowfold at 03.00 hours on 29 May 1940.

In the summer of 1940 the Battle of Britain intensified the raids. Airfields were a prime target. On Friday 16 August RAF Tangier was attacked by Stuka dive-bombers, inflicting severe damage and leaving 13 killed. On the following Sunday the Fleet Air Force at Ford was dive-bombed with 28 killed. A granite memorial was erected in Climping churchyard.

There were some appalling tragedies. On Tuesday 29 September 1942 the boys' school at Petworth was bombed by a low-flying Juicer, killing 28 boys aged 7 to 12 and two of their teachers. Another terrible disaster, with even more dead, occurred at East Grinstead on 9 July 1943 when the Whitehall Cinema and many business premises were demolished by a string of bombs dropped by a lone German aircraft. One hundred and eight were killed and over two hundred injured. The *Sussex Express* and *County Herald* called it 'The County's Greatest Tragedy'.

Petworth Boys' School: the devastation



Above: The Petworth funeral cortege

Left: East Grinstead bombed, July 1943

Below: The King and Queen inspect flying bomb damage, East Grinstead, July 1944



A year later Hitler launched the first of his secret weapons, the pilotless flying bomb - the doodlebug. The first reported to fall in England crashed at Mizbrooks Farm, near Cuckfield, in the early hours of 13 June 1944.

Almost nine hundred flying bombs crashed on Sussex between June and August 1944, mostly in the east of the county. So great was the danger that children from East Grinstead and the surrounding villages of Ashurst Wood, Forest Row, West Hoavy and Worth, were evacuated out of the area altogether.

BOARDS OF WORKING EDUCATION COMMITTEE AIR RAID PRECAUTIONS.

1. In no circumstances will children be allowed to leave school premises after an air raid/warning call. The 'All Clear' has been sounded, call at the request and on the safe of a parent or a responsible person authorized by the parent.
2. Children on the way to school when a warning is sounded should return to their homes or proceed in the way of their parents.
3. The children on the way to school when a warning is sounded should return to their homes or proceed in the way of their parents.
4. In the event of an air raid warning school will meet *half an hour* after the 'All Clear' has been sounded, but parents will not send their children before 8 a.m. and 2 p.m.
5. All children are expected to school after 12 noon when they will be assembled at school in the afternoon after an interval of 1 hour following the 'All Clear' being sounded by 1.15 p.m., but the 'All Clear' is considered after 1.15, there will be an afternoon school session.

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Phone 2888, 2889
1000 - LITTLEHAMPTON - 700

PERNHURST WELCOME HOME COMMITTEE
Organized since the War Christmas Eve 1945
Dear Sir, or Madam,
It has been decided that the *Pernhurst Welcome Home in Parkhurst Area* and *Women who have left the Village to serve in the Army, Navy, Air Force or Merchant Marine*, shall take the form of an entertainment, with light refreshments, together with a general gift.
This will be a most desirable gift.
To carry the programme out the Committee will require further funds and any contribution which you may wish to make will be welcome.
Contributions should be sent to the Hon. Treasurer, Mr. G. H. Bishop, The Cottage, Parkhurst, or may be handed to any of the following: Mr. Hill, Mr. Bishop or to the Hon. Treasurer.
All contributions will be acknowledged by post. It is the intention of the Committee that any money remaining after the above programme has been carried out should go towards the provision of a permanent memorial.
Yours faithfully,
E. E. J. Bishop, Chairman
G. H. Bishop, Hon. Treasurer
J. R. T. Smith, Hon. Secretary

Daily Mirror
PEACE
JAPAN SURRENDERS



IS PEACE LIKE THIS EVERYDAY!
Thanksgiving and celebrations greeted the German and Japanese surrenderers in 1945: on VE Day - Victory in Europe - on 8 May, and VJ Day - Victory in Japan - on 15 August.

With the nightmare of six long years of war ended, one Barnham Land Army girl, Daphne Byrne, recalls unfurling a moth-eaten Union Jack on top of a water tower and then all the neighbours down the lane stringing up flags, bunting and streamers. In Bognor, she said, everyone was 'going crazy with joy'. Along the coast, Joan Strange watched aeroplanes doing victory rolls over Worthing. Church bells rang and bonfires burned along the top of the Downs. Every church had its service of thanksgiving.

On VE Day rationing was forgotten as open air street parties were hastily organised. One little boy in Horsham, faced with lemonade, cake and ice cream, was heard to ask 'Is peace like this every day?'

After the Japanese surrender, the peace celebrations were started all over again. In Henfield the High Street was illuminated, a victory tea was held at Slindon. It came had come at last!

VE Day, Bognor

West Sussex at War
1939 - 1945

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:

The County Archivist

West Sussex Record Office, County Hall, Chichester, PO19 1RN

Telephone: 01243 753602

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VE Day tea party, Ringmer Road, Worthing

