

THE SECOND WORLD WAR

“War declared. A fine day”. So runs the laconic diary entry for 3rd September 1939 of Tom Soanes, poultry dealer, farmer and carrier of Church Hill, Middleton. By now radio was the speedy carrier of news good and bad and Neville Chamberlain’s broadcast following the German invasion of Poland was heard throughout the land with rapt attention but without the illusions which accompanied the announcement in August 1914. Patriotism was not dead however and a party of cyclists at Mrs Crompton’s tea house in Station Road was made to stand and sing God Save the King.

The fearful carnage of the First War had resulted in the disintegration of four empires into independent states but had not brought security to Europe. The crisis-prone post war German government, the Weimar Republic, was dealt a severe blow by the world wide slump in 1929 and in 1933 Hitler was brought to power to cure the immediate economic problems. He quickly established a brutal dictatorship intent on reasserting Germany’s role in the world with an aggressive foreign policy. Other European states tended to be self-absorbed, while the United States largely remained aloof from European affairs and the Soviet Union was distrusted.

Britain managed to avoid the extreme politics despite the economic hardship although Mosley’s fascists had at least one meeting in Driffield.

At the end of the war the government had quickly reneged on its promise to support agriculture, consequently farming in this area was depressed. A lifeline was thrown to the workforce however in the mid thirties when the Government, waking up to the future threat of enemy air power, ordered the rebirth of Driffield RAF station thereby creating well paid construction jobs and by August 1936 it was receiving squadrons.

On the outbreak of war the Government once again enacted Emergency Powers to control all aspects of life and property. Food production became an urgent priority and many bureaucratic controls were introduced to ensure sufficient supplies for the operation of the nationwide rationing system which was to remain in force with varying intensity until the 1950s.

Military conscription was introduced from the beginning but exemption was granted to key agricultural workers who would however be expected to perform Home Guard or other war duties. Jack Bentley was a member of the Warter Home Guard which had Mr Campbell the estate manager as commander. In Middleton Harry Gee, council roadman was the Commander.

As early as 8th February 1939 Tom Soanes had recorded in his diary “Went to ARP at Bainton (Air Raid Precautions). This was quickly followed by further meetings and First Aid activities after war was declared.

The first months following the declaration came to be known in Britain as the “Phoney War” because of the lack of military offensive but on the 17 September 1939 Tom Soanes’ diary read “Nice day. Russia walked into Poland” thus completing the dismemberment of that country we had pledged to assist.

The winter of 1939/40 was particularly severe. His diary records air raid warnings on the 22nd October and the 21st November but normal routines were maintained with trips to Hull and visits to the cinema. On the 4th April 1940 he recorded “First meeting of Observer Corps” a body he was to be associated with until 3rd June 1955 which had an observation point on the North Dalton road. His duties required a knowledge of aircraft recognition and on the 22nd April he recorded “Heard guns firing at aircraft over Humber”. He was also the Parish Clerk.

Bombing raids increased and on the 19th June 1940 he recorded “Air Raid midnight – 4 am. Bombs falling at Bainton station etc” and on the 15th August “Large raid on Driffeld Aerodrome. I saw it about 1.15pm”.

With the fall of France and the Dunkirk evacuation in May the threat of a German invasion had grown closer but after the enemy failed to gain air superiority in the Battle of Britain the immediate threat receded and in June 1941 any invasion was put on the back burner following Germany’s attack on Russia.

Before that event however on the 7th and 8th May his entry read “Hull Blitz” and on the 9th May “No eggs for Co-op. Hull a terrible mess!” These devastating raids, which are etched in the folk memories of the people of Hull were witnessed from afar by Jack Bentley who was working at Cobdale farm north west of Warter and situated 195 metres above sea level.

The Second World War came to be known as the “People’s War” and the distinction between the Home Front and the fighting front became blurred. The Government by legislation and propaganda put a legal and moral duty on the people to engage in a struggle for national survival. As a result there was hardly a part of the country inhabited or uninhabitable that was not associated with war activities (many of which remained secret) and the consequent influx of strangers. This added a new and often exciting dimension to village life, particularly for the young. Tom Soanes’ first reference to the army presence was 18th September 1940 “Soldiers made a hole in granary” and his last 20th February 1944 “Soldiers broke down gate post and burnt gate went into wheat field.”

There was a REME unit in the village with a NAAFI in Station Road later used as a school canteen. The Free French were also present. These were soldiers from France and her colonies together with Spaniards who had fled after the civil war in Spain all of whom had escaped to Britain after the fall of France with the aim of continuing the fight against fascism. Jack Bentley remembers them being “grand fellows” and recalls football matches at Huggate after which they introduced the locals to wine and baguettes. A less fortunate incident however was when one crashed an armoured vehicle into the brick wall on the sharp bend on Station Road near the present takeaway. Brigade headquarters was Kilnwick Percy Hall (Le Chateau) and Westwood House, North Dalton was also used. Doreen Munby (nee Soanes) remembers seeing General Leclerc, who was later allowed by the Americans to enter

occupied Paris at the head of the liberation army, take the salute of his troops outside the garage in Front Street. De Gaulle may also have visited North Dalton as he attended at Hull Guildhall to meet the Lord Mayor. Churchill himself visited Londesborough.

After Pearl Harbour in December 1941 the United States entered the war and Hazel Brown recalls that there were eventually some 200 US army personnel housed in huts in the Hall grounds near to the wall adjoining the cemetery. They enjoyed very good supplies even being able to show the latest films in the village hall. Hazel still possesses a basic mess spoon belonging to a soldier and often wonders what became of him.

An unfortunate aspect of their stay was the discrimination, prevalent at the time shown against black personnel who spent a disproportionate amount of time on guard duty. Hazel recalls that her uncle Percy Dove, a veteran of the first war, received a visit from the US Colonel who asked him none too politely to exclude black soldiers from the pub. Mr Dove informed the Colonel that he would decide who used his pub and told the Colonel to absent himself.

Hazel's independently minded grandmother sympathised with the black soldiers and invited some to tea with the result that she exhausted her own meagre supplies.

There were also German and Italian prisoners of war in the village. Here again Hazel's grandmother was not averse to make toast for some of the Germans. The ordinary members of the Wehrmacht tended to behave themselves, no doubt preferring Middleton to the thought of the Russian front but it was different with the U Boat crews who were often the more fanatical Nazi types whose activities had a devastating affect on allied shipping and the food supply.

There were many activities in the village during the course of the war. The Rose and Crown pub was preferred by younger people whilst the older liked the Robin Hood. Women used pubs more than in pre war days and much of the adult population smoked.

The school grappled with the influx of evacuees from Sunderland and elsewhere and in one of the reports of religious instruction the Revd Vivian made reference to commendable results in spite of the disruptive experiences.

In Spring 1943 the farmers were told by Lieutenant-General Sir Ralph Eastwood, the officer commanding Northern Command that despite the key role they were playing in food production the Wolds had to be used for training purposes and all sheep removed from the area north of the Market Weighton – Driffield road. This was training for what would become known as D Day in June 1944. Manoeuvres were carried out involving tanks and maps of the area were produced in the French style so that troops would become accustomed to them in preparation for the real thing. The area was considered similar to Normandy where the landings were to take place. However the hedges on the Wolds were lower than "bocage" encountered in Normandy and this proved costly when the invasion took place. Cliff Pratt recalls the dangers of visiting the Wolds at that time in his book "Sixty-six years as a touring cyclist" when he states "tanks were liable to burst suddenly through the hedge – cross

the road and disappear through the hedge opposite (more hedges existed in those days). One had to watch the hedgeroad even more than the road”.

Jack Bentley recalled an incident in the later stages of the war when he was returning one night with his friends on a bus from Pocklington en route to Huggate. The bus was stopped in Warton by military policemen because there was a long convoy of vehicles in connection with the training for the D Day landings and the passengers were told to continue on foot away from the road. And so Jack had to "leg it" over fields to Huggate.

It is worth noting that when the invasion force advanced through Normandy one of the towns badly damaged was Mortain the name place of Robert the half brother of William the Conqueror who for a brief time after the conquest owned the land in Middleton. In September 1944 the Wolds were handed back to farmers.

Despite all these excitements normal activities took place such as the following recorded in the Driffield Times as in 1943:

A talk on the work of the modern poets.

Miss Moate was succeeded by Mr S G Hogarth (Headmaster) as honorary librarian for the village library.

In October the Middleton Girls' Club under Miss Helen Clark were shown around the Hull Guildhall by the Lady Mayoress Mrs Schultz (wife of the man to become the dominant figure in post war local Hull politics). They visited St Mary's Church, Lowgate and finished off at the New Theatre to see the Agatha Christie play now known as "Ten Little Indians".

On the 4th November Tom Soanes saw Tommy Handley of the wartime radio classic ITMA fame in Hull.

In recent years the existence of a "secret army" has become known. These were locals recruited typically with great stealth by the authorities from persons with extensive local knowledge, firearms experience and a willingness to face certain death if caught. Skill at poaching was a useful extra qualification. By the feeble standards of the time they were well armed with such items as a revolver, dagger and Mills bombs. Their purpose was to provide a last ditch opposition in case of a successful invasion. Their story is told in the book "East Riding's Secret Resistance" by Alan Williamson.

In Prickett's Hollow wood there was an underground chamber with primitive living accommodation for use by local personnel and other such retreats were scattered throughout the East Riding. The Rose and Crown public house in Middleton was used as an unofficial meeting place for the men. Everything was unofficial in a phantom body of men that did not "exist" and who had signed the Official Secrets Act which legally prevented them from informing their wives of the reason for their absence and possible disappearance.

If an invasion had happened the rearguard action of these men would have met with savage reprisals from the Germans as happened in other occupied countries.

Enemy bombing continued throughout the war and Tom Soanes' diary contains various references to air activities:

“11th February 1943 Aircraft crashed at North Dalton
3rd November 1943 Aircraft crashed near Moneypot
3rd March 1945 Jerry planes over.”

With VE Day on 8th May 1945 Tom allowed himself alcoholic celebrations and on 15th August 1945 following the surrender of Japan his entry reads “PEACE declared”.

The end of the war in Europe was marked in the village with a service in the church. The Driffield Times reads:

“On VE Day there was a United Thanksgiving service held in St. Andrew's Church, conducted by the Rector. On Sunday evening the church was crowded all the various organisations in the village being represented. The service was conducted by the Rector and Mr W Eastwood was at the organ. Before the service a parade was held, the following attending: Home Guard, Civil Defence personnel, NFS, Royal Observer Corps, WVS, Womens' Section of the British Legion, Guides and Brownies, Boy Scouts and Cubs, Middleton Girls' Club. The collection was for the restoration of bombed churches in Europe.”

The explosion of the two atom bombs which ended the war in Japan heralded a new world order potentially no more safe than in 1918. But this time the government took agriculture more seriously.

For those who had gone off to war the return to civilian life could be more difficult than they imagined. The comradeship built up serving in the forces together with shared experiences in different locations meant that the world they had left behind them seemed a little flat. Their homecoming was not helped by the austerity of the post war world although in the village the basic food ration could be supplemented by local connections.

POSTSCRIPT:

On the 8th June 1972 the Driffield Times reported:

“The Rector of Middleton-on-the-Wolds with Dalton the Rev. Cecil Hume welcomed over 60 French guests in the Village Hall. Most of the men had been billeted in the village and old friendships were renewed. Several of them immediately recognised Mrs Annie Hotham who was licensee of the Robin Hood public house for 26 years covering the war. After the official welcome many of the visitors called at the Robin Hood and sampled our English beer”.

Reference was also made to the fact that during the war several officers used to visit Mr & Mrs J. W. Noble at their home in Middleton.

The extracts from Tom Soanes' diaries are reproduced with kind permission of Mr & Mrs R Soanes.

