

## Ewelme in 1940

### Ewelme News, Apr-May 2020

In 1940 Ewelme was preparing for German invasion. Local shopkeeper, Fred Greenway, wrote an account of those perilous days in his essay *'Ewelme - One More Page'*. As 1939 ended, the first panic wave of London child evacuees from St Saviours in Paddington, had been and gone, as Ewelme was considered too unsafe for the children! The blackout was in place, and sandbags protected the medieval tombs in the church. Petrol rationing had come into force, with bumpers on vehicles painted white for night driving. Gasmasks for all were delivered from Wheatley in Mr Gemmell's horsebox. RAF Benson was sprayed with camouflage paint and each night the village lanes were filled with military convoys, dispersed for safety from bombing. On 26<sup>th</sup> January 1940, the Army held tank manoeuvres around Ewelme. Fred Greenway observed that - *"Odd corners of The Street were sliced off, a few walls were pushed over and deep gashes in the grass verge showed where they had 'rested'. The grass soon grew over, and the walls were put back."*

*"By 1940 we were settling down... Air Raid Precaution exercises, wardens patrolling our streets all night up to 5 o'clock in the morning – the enemy would not be unreasonable and bomb us out of hours... In June 1940, sheep from the Romney Marshes came to some farms. The wise said that in the event of invasion Romney Marshes were to be flooded. We piously hoped that a goodly number of the enemy would be drowned. It was in June 1940, that we heard Mr Eden calling for the citizen army to defend England. We were to see these first members of the Local Defence Volunteers (renamed The Home Guard).*



**Home Guard practising in the School Playground**

*Barricades and roadblocks were built; cunning slit trenches appeared in the most unlikely places."* Those who lived in the houses in Clay [now Green] Lane had to pass through a military roadblock to get home. *"On 25<sup>th</sup> June 1940, we had our first local air-raid warning. We donned respirators, and*

went to our pitiful home-made shelters, a little afraid. The chief worry seemed to be whether our black-out was alright and if our shelter would stand the blast. But no bombs came, and we felt at that time rather cheated. But on 30<sup>th</sup> June 1940, the bombs did come –thirteen at Roke and three or four at Ewelme. At last we had our bomb stories to tell. On the 13<sup>th</sup> August 1940, a grey and cloudy afternoon, a solitary ‘Jerry’ bombed and shot up the aerodrome. No one was hurt. Through lack of warning, a number of WAAF’s were not in a bomb shelter that took a direct hit.” A startled Percy Tuckwell, who looked after the farm horses stabled opposite the Shepherd’s Hut, witnessed this drama. Also, a young Aubrey Gilbey who was with Sydney Wingfield atop a load of hay at The Pightles, near Cottesmore Lane, saw an Avro Anson approach and land, closely followed by a Junkers 88. They saw the bombs leave the aircraft and explode.

Two incidents of daylight strafing by enemy planes were recorded in villager interviews. Several remembered the strafing of workers in the watercress beds. As the airfield was cleverly camouflaged, they supposed the frustrated gunners sprayed bullets down the High Street. Mr Howard from Roke, who occasionally lived at ‘The Lamb’, had to fling himself into the water to save his life. As he later told the bemused innkeepers the Dymonds – *‘I dived myself under the cress....!’* Another story is that farmer Orpwood’s harvesters were strafed at Huntinglands, *‘the bullets spurting up dirt in a line along the ground.’*

On 8<sup>th</sup> September 1940 the Home Guard was ordered to stand-by for imminent invasion. Cars were immobilised, petrol pumps disconnected, signposts removed, and milestones obliterated. Even bicycles were locked away to deny the enemy transport. The local sub-postmaster had been instructed to *“‘withdraw and conceal’ a vital part from the inside of the automatic telephone exchange.”* That month saw the merciless bombing of London. Mr Greenway remembers *“The red glow of the fires, heightened by blue flashes, could be seen from our street; London was ‘taking it’. Soon we were to receive some of her stricken people. Our village bulged, but room was found for them. Often our daily papers did not arrive until afternoon, and the post was three to five days delayed. We all refrained from using the telephone, and it was considered anti-social to send any but the most urgent telegrams.”* There was some light relief on 17<sup>th</sup> September when four runaway barrage balloons danced in high winds over the village, to be quickly shot down.

On 3<sup>rd</sup> October senior officers from RAF Benson inspected village houses to requisition accommodation for RAF personnel. WAAF’s were billeted at The White House, other Service families lived at Saffron House and The Lamb Inn. Even the Master’s Room had Warrant Officer Brooks, his wife and three children living there. Blitz evacuees had arrived, causing an influx of schoolchildren, and new voices in the Choir. That same night, bombs fell on Swyncombe Woods, probably attracted by fires at a Gypsy camp. Also in October the larger fields became studded with strong posts as an anti-glider measure. Mr Greenway recorded - *“The night of 15<sup>th</sup> November was filled with enemy raiders out for what, we were to learn, was the massacre raid on Coventry. It is remembered as the heaviest load of aircraft over Ewelme, until the summer of 1944, when the aircraft were our own. A few bombs were overspilled on their way back, just missing Watlington’s Hospital and railway station.”* Although bombs fell close to Ewelme, none seriously damaged property, (the Wellington shot down as it approached to land, blowing out the windows of the Shepherds Hut, occurred later in the war!)

RAF Benson was opened in February 1939, and during that year until the end of December 1940 (when the Photo Reconnaissance Unit Spitfires arrived), the airfield was used mainly to train pilots and air gunners on Fairey Battles. In April 1940 three Battle Squadrons amalgamated to form No 12 Operations Training Unit, with Polish and Czech aircrew added.

The Battle was a single-engine, monoplane light bomber, but proved not ideal for training the inexperienced. Villagers remembered them *‘always crashing’*. There were 23 crashes throughout 1940 alone, 22 Battles and 1 Spitfire, largely due to pilot error. One famous casualty was Pilot Officer Richard Shuttleworth who founded the Shuttleworth Collection of vintage aircraft at Old Warden. On the night of 2nd August, whilst practising ‘circuits and bumps’, as he climbed away he

crashed into trees on Mr Medleys Farm (at Cottesmore). This was the third collision with local trees, so by 26<sup>th</sup> November all the elms between Ewelme to Benson and along The Pightles had been felled. The tall cedar tree at The Old Mansion in Cottesmore Lane also caught pilots out. Local electrician Herbie Winfield fitted a warning red light on its top.



**The Battle aircraft.**

Fred Greenway closed 1940 - *"The year 1940, by the grace of God, closed with Britain still defiant, licking her wounds and gathering her strength. Christmas was austere, but the carollers sang in the village, and the stars from a clear sky shone over many a stable that again was warm shelter for the homeless"*. As it happened a local stable was sheltering the homeless. Refugees from the Blitz, Julie Evans, her younger sister Pat, and Julie's little daughter June, were accommodated in the Horsley's stables at The White House - still standing today. The villagers supplied them with an oil stove, oil lamps, pots, pans, china and cutlery – the girls were forever grateful, and for the next fifty years continued to visit their Ewelme friends.

*Ewelme Village Archive*