

The Day War Broke Out by Martin Jackson

'My wife turned to me and said "What good are yer" according to the revered comedian, Rob Wilton. I expect Martin Jackson can remember Wilton, even if he cant' do the voice, but from Helpston and Etton on that day somewhat different recollections emerge as Martin relates ...

'The first bombs dropped on England were on Etton. The Rev Curtis was at George Crowson's house requesting help as one bomb blew his rockery up and damaged the rectory roof. There was a dummy airfield nearby to attract bombers away from the real ones. Nine other bombs were dropped in the field just over the railway on Glington Road.

'We soon realised that we were all in the front line of fire. One foggy November day, a German plane, following the railway line, opened fire on me as I waited to cross over. I saw the gunner swing his gun and bullets sprayed the gates in front of me, the signal box door, and the four cottages and house belonging to the mill. One bullet pierced a bucket of mortar being carried up a ladder at the mill. He went on and shot dead an engine driver at Walton.

Dig for Victory!

Agriculture was in a poor state at the outbreak of war. Most of this parish was covered with twitch, thistles, nettles, docks and brambles. We were dependent on imports: beef from the Argentine, wheat from Canada and the USA, sugar from the West Indies, pork from Holland and worst of all, grain from Russia, where their own people were starving. The convoys were being sunk by German U-boats. Twice during the war, our food reserves fell to within two weeks of exhaustion.

War Agricultural Committees were set up and grants were paid to plough grassland and sow wheat, paid for by acreage, plus a low price per ton, almost as now. Farms had to grow some potatoes and grassland was improved to produce milk and beef. Tractors were appearing but much work was done by horses. Spraying was unheard of, as were combines. All cereals were cut by binder, stacked and threshed. Wheat was put into 18 stone sacks (112kg) and we would carry these great bulks all day, often up ladders. We worked all hours, helped by the Women's Land Army, and prisoners of war. The latter sometimes threatened to burn our crops!

Put that Light Out!

The greatest menace early on was incendiary bombs. They would drop through roofs into attics and set fire to houses. We were advised to keep a bucket of sand and shovel to smother them and a stirrup pump and a bucket of water for extinguishing fires, though every village had its Auxiliary Fire Service.

Air Raid Wardens were continually on duty, warning of faulty blackouts and lights. Even car lamps had louvers so that they could not be seen from the air. I once left a light on in a barn. Gravel came rattling on my bedroom window – an Air Raid Warden had spotted it. After I rushed down to turn off the offending light, I had not been in bed long before I heard the ‘bump, bump’, but they were at Woodcroft. They might have been nearer if they had seen the light.

Churchill’s Army

Having sent the only troops from the UK to north Africa (Charlie Homes was one who went), Churchill formed the Local Defence Volunteers, later to become the Home Guard. Their purpose was to ensure that every parish had lookouts on duty every hour, day and night. Invasion was expected. We were to report any landing from air or sea.

There were about forty of us and at first our only transport was the bicycle and our defence, a broomstick. Those of us with shotguns were a little more fortunate until we were issued with .303 rifles. I shall never know how we had the strength to work from 6 ‘til sunset and still patrol the roads and guard bridges at night. There were many jokes about Dad’s Army, but I am sure that we could have helped stop the spread of invasion.

Life in Helpston and Etton

If memory serves me well, ‘The Railway Hotel’ was looked upon as Etton’s pub. The Golden Pheasant was Farmer Goodale’s house and Etton was where the Rector Curtis lived. The Vergettes and the Websters were the other farmers.

Helpston had the Exeter Arms, the Blue Bell, the Parting Pot, the Prince of Wales, the Feathers and the Queen’s Head. The Post Office was run by the Ellis family.

The railway station was very active, with a station master, ticket collector and three porters. Nearly all grain and sugar beet was loaded onto trains and cattlecake and fertilisers also came by rail. Coal and wood pulp for the mill came into the station yard and trains from Stamford and Peterborough catered for shoppers and school children. There were no buses.

Electricity and mains water came to the village in 1945. We had to contribute to the running of the hospitals and also pay doctors' bills. Petrol costs 10 pence a gallon and was rationed to 2 gallons a month with an extra allowance for necessary activities.

Milk was 2 ½ pence a pint. I was supplying Helpston with milk and eggs so had to deal with ration books. Coupons had to be collected to obtain supplies. I remember once having spent all day trying to cut a flattened crop of oats with a binder. When it was jammed up you had to turn some tines over to get the straw out. In the middle of the night I had a binder choc-full of ration books. I can see them now!

Entertainment was almost non-existent, although we did keep a youth club going. We had two coal stoves and paraffin lamps in the Hall, and similar in our homes. It was the greatest relief on VE Day to take down the blackout shutters and feel safe when you went to bed.

I hope that every man, woman and child feels that the sacrifice made by so many in those days was worthwhile to maintain our freedom in this wonderful country.

Martin Jackson

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