

MINCH INHAMPTON LOCAL HISTORY GROUP

ANNUAL BULLETIN NUMBER 12

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MINCHINHAMPTON LOCAL HISTORY GROUP

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PROGRAMME OF PAST EVENTS

| | | | |
|------|-------|----------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1994 | Nov. | The Roman Villa at Chedworth | Mr. C. Bishop |
| 1995 | Jan. | History of English Coinage | Mr. L. Eden |
| | March | The History of Avening | - Mr. E. Vincent |
| | May | James Bradley C 18th Astronomer | - Dr. A. Chapman |
| | July | “When Grandad was a Boy” | Local History Exhibition |
| | Aug. | Evening walk around Avening | |
| | Sept. | New History of the Parish Church | - Mr. R. Acock |

FOREWARD

In July 1995 the Local History Group staged an exhibition entitled "When Grandad was a Boy. This was designed to mark the fiftieth anniversaries of V.E. and V.J. Day in 1995, but as well as showing facets of wartime life in Minchinhampton, there was reference to life both before and after the conflict. The timescale was from the Thirties to the Coronation, and this years bulletin draws on the information from that exhibition for its articles.

MINCHINHAMPTON IN THE 1930s

John Cooper

The aim of this exhibit was to set the scene by comparing the town in the 1930s with Minchinhampton today. It outlined the many and varied activities in the three main streets, High Street, West End and Tetbury Street, and with the aid of aerial photographs illustrated the extent of the post-war development, both public and private. It concluded with a series of photographs showing places and people in the 1930s.

The comparison of aerial photographs and large-scale maps shows that Minchinhampton in the 1930s was comparatively compact with many fields quite close to the centre in Glebe Farm and Park Farm, for instance. Post-war developments have greatly increased both the size and population of the town; the population of the civil parish increasing from 3,753 in 1931 to 5,163 in 1982.

The building of council estates was started in the Tynings and Box Crescent before the war, but these were extended later, and the large Glebe Estate was developed from the mid 1950s onwards. Private housing also grew rapidly, including Blueboys Park (1950s), the large Cotswold Park and Beacon Park sites (1960s), Besbury Park in the late 1960s and more recently smaller sites at Highcroft and Dr. Crawford's Close. Many individual houses were also built in the post-war years.

In addition to the expansion of housing, the post-war period also saw the provision of many new public facilities, often replacing old buildings. The old Primary School, built in 1868, was demolished in 1968 and the modern school built nearby; a new Rectory replaced the large older rectory (The Priest's House). In the 1930s surgeries were held by Dr. Brown at Highcroft and by Dr. Roberts at the Close in Well Hill, but in the 1970s a large, new surgery block was built within the old walled garden in Bell Lane. The Library which formerly occupied space in the Minchinhampton Institute in Tetbury Street is now accommodated in purpose-built premises also within the walled garden. The old Police Station in West End, which is now a private house, was replaced by the present Police Houses in Butt Street in the 1950s.

Provision for the elderly has also been an important feature of the post-war years. The old farm buildings of Park Farm, used in part as a coal depot in the 1930s, have been tastefully converted to the flats of Park Farm Court, and Simmonds builders yard in West End to the sheltered housing of Simmonds Court. George Pearce House formed a central feature of the Glebe Estate, whilst more recent additions include Cecily Court and the Minchinhampton Centre for the Elderly at Horsefall House. Stuart House, another old rectory, used for billeting troops during the war, was opened as a day centre for the disabled in the early 1980s and extended in 1990, the same year that the Cotswold Care Hospice opened in Burleigh Lane. Nor were the young forgotten. The well-appointed Youth Centre and its associated sports facilities were built in the 1960s in the former grounds of Stuart House.

Kellys Trades Directory for Gloucestershire for 1939 shows a wide range of professional and commercial activities in the town. Thanks to the kind help of Mr. Clifford Hooper and Mr. Frank Simmonds it has been possible to locate details of these in the three main streets - High Street, West End and Tetbury Street.

Many of these activities still continue in 1995. The chemist's shop, two butchers and the outfitters at the Cross still continue on the same sites, as do the Post Office and the stationers in West End. Others, however, have disappeared or been reduced in number. In 1939, for instance, there were five inns in the town the Crown, the Ram, the Salutation, the Swan and the Trumpet - now only the Crown remains. There were six grocers or provision dealers, now only two remain. Hughes Store in the High Street is now Arden

House, Walkers Stores forms the office of Yew Tree Properties, whilst the Stroud Co-operative Society's store in West End is now a private house. Walkers Cycle Shop in the High Street is now occupied by the Coffee Bean and the smithy in Tetbury Street has been converted into flats. Neither of the two bakers, nor the two shoe repairers, now remain. Of the two builders yards in West End, Simmonds' Yard has been converted, as previously mentioned, and Daniels' Yard is now a private house.

Photographs of the 1930s illustrate a much quieter town with only a few cars and no parking problems. A pony and trap was still a common form of transport. There was a regular bus service to Stroud and railway stations at Chalford, Brimscombe and Nailsworth, but much travel was by foot or bicycle. It was not until the 1950s that the buildings by Parson's Court, behind the Ram, were demolished to provide much needed parking space.

The town had an active social life, based on the church and the chapel, and on the Minchinhampton Institute and the British Legion Club (now the Cotswold Club), together with a wide range of sporting activities. Photographs of the choir, the cricket and football clubs and of the children in the school in the 1930s, brought back vivid memories of the time to many who visited the exhibition.

THE TIME LINE

The dates below are reproduced in part from the 1994 Country Fayre Exhibition. Capital letters show world or national events, whilst those in lower case relate to the Minchinhampton area.

1930 **COMMERCIALLY FROZEN FOOD SOLD**
PLANET PLUTO DISCOVERED

1931 **EMPIRE STATE BUILDING OPENED**
End of the town fire brigade

1932 **SYDNEY HARBOUR BRIDGE OPENED**
FIRST CHRISTMAS BROADCAST

1933 **NAZIS GAIN POWER IN GERMANY**
U.S. PROHIBITION ABOLISHED
Thames & Severn Canal closed

1934 **"BODYLINE" CRICKET SERIES**
DRIVING TESTS INTRODUCED

1935 **ITALY INVADES ABYSSINIA**
SILVER JUBILEE OF KING GEORGE V

1936 **SPANISH CIVIL WAR STARTS**
ABDICATION CRISIS

1937 **EIRE CREATED**
CORONATION OF KING GEORGE VI
First council houses built

1938 **MUNICH AGREEMENT**
Aston Down Airfield opened
Ricardo family sell Gatcombe

1939 **POLAND INVADED - W.W.II**
"PHONEY WAR"
Birmingham evacuees arrive

1940 **DUNKIRK EVACUATION**
BATTLE OF BRITAIN
Duke of Kent visits Aston Down
Essex evacuees arrive
Extremely severe winter frosts
Stroud Spitfire purchased

1941 **JAPANESE ATTACK PEARL HARBOUR**
Minchinhampton Home Guard formed
Stroud Air Raid alerts

1942 **BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN**
War Book compiled for the Town

- 1943 ALLIED INVASION OF ITALY
 England v Wales at Kingsholm
 Market House became Army canteen
- 1944 D DAY LANDINGS IN FRANCE
 "V BOMB" RAIDS ON LONDON
 U. S. Forces camp on the Park
- 1945 GERMANY SURRENDERED
 ATOMIC BOMBS DROPPED ON JAPAN
 UNITED NATIONS INAUGURATED
 V.E. & V.J. parties in the Town
- 1946 NUREMBURG WAR TRIALS
 HEALTH SERVICE INSTITUTED
 Grazing resumes on the Common
 Golf Clubhouse burned down
 M. D. S. productions resume
- 1947 "BABY BOOM" IN BRITAIN
 Last L.M.S. passenger train
 Lord Butler inherits Gatcombe
- 1948 MAHATMA GANDHI ASSASSINATED
 THE BERLIN AIRLIFT
 ISRAEL FORMALLY CREATED
- 1949 "COMET" JET AIRLINER FLIES
- 1950 U.N. TROOPS DEFEND KOREA
 Minchinhampton Scouts re-form
- 1951 FESTIVAL OF BRITAIN
- 1952 DEATH OF GEORGE VI
- 1953 EVEREST CLIMBED
 CORONATION OF ELIZABETH II
 St. Barnabas Church dedicated
 Gas street lighting ceases

R. A. F. ASTON DOWN IN WARTIME

Mrs. Diana Wall

In March 1935 the Luftwaffe was formed in Germany by Adolf Hitler, a move viewed seriously by the R. A. F. who in turn planned a major expansion to 75 squadrons. The powers that be looked to former locations of airfields, to factories and to new sites in Gloucestershire, and on 12th October 1938 Aston Down Airfield was opened.

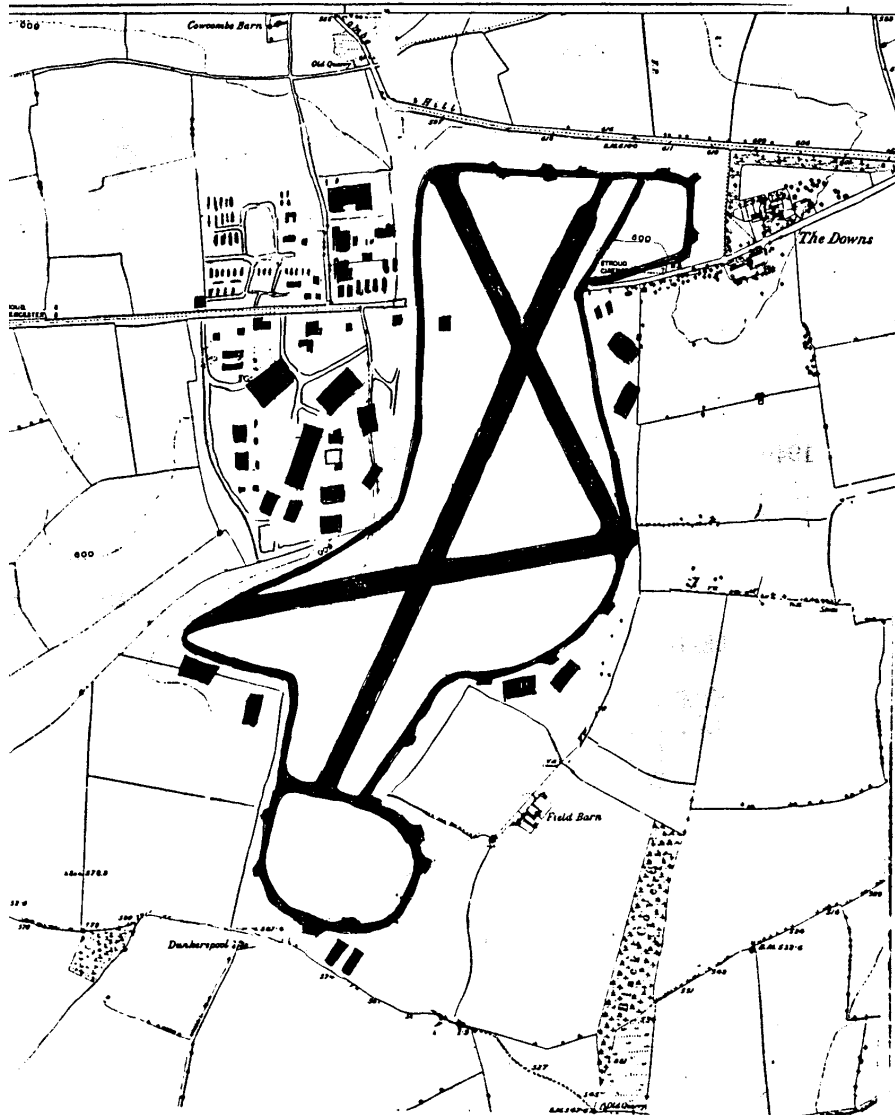
Within the boundaries of the new airfield lay the whole of the World War I Minchinhampton Aerodrome, which had played host to the Australian Flying Corps in 1918-1919. Some of the old buildings were adapted for new uses, but the early hangars had been of canvas and had been removed in 1920, so the firm of Wilson Lovatt and Sons Ltd. were engaged to build the W Type hangars, which can still be seen today.

The new airfield was to be much larger than its predecessor, so land was requisitioned to the south, part of Aston Farm. The Minchinhampton to Cirencester road was blocked off, allowing a runway extension. The grass runway was not replaced by concrete until 1941, and for most of its operational life construction work was being carried out. Accommodation was only provided slowly; in 1940 W.A.A.F. lavatories were built, alongside a lecture room and an armoury. The final airfield included several dispersal sites, as well as administration buildings, workshops and accommodation for personnel.

Throughout the war Aston Down fulfilled two main functions - that of aircraft maintenance and operational training. No. 20 Maintenance Unit, or M.U., were the first to occupy the base and their role throughout the conflict ensured the maximum number of planes were available for frontline squadrons. At first work was mainly on fighter aircraft, but later this was extended to bombers, both British and American. Apart from engine servicing, work was carried out in painting camouflage, electrical installation and modifying aircraft for tours in the Middle East. Many of the personnel had been recruited from peacetime skilled occupations; for example, the Western Electric Company provided many of the electricians. Female workers were especially skilled in instrument

repair, and worked on the wiring looms

Wartime Aston Down Airfield



of Typhoons. Many also installed the early forms of radar in Lancasters and Mitchells. Civilian female workers were often billeted in Minchinhampton and surrounding villages.

Accommodation was a problem when the first Operational Training Unit (O.T.U.) came to Aston Down in August 1939. The George Hotel at Nailsworth became an Officers Mess; twelve officers also lived there, for which the Air Ministry paid six shillings a day! O.T.U.s had evolved after the Munich Crisis of 1938, when Mobilisation Pools were formed. 55 O.T.U. and 52 O.T.U. were the main units on Aston Down during the war, and the latter set up a satellite airfield at Chedworth in 1942. Both units also regularly used Babdown Airfield, near Tetbury.

In the days up to the Battle of Britain there was a shortage of fighter pilots and aircraft so the training took place on Gloster Gladiators, Harvards and Blenheims. By 1941 both Spitfires and Hurricanes were available on Aston Down for training purposes, along with two-seat Miles Master aircraft. In the build-up to the invasion of France a Tactical Exercise Unit was formed at Aston Down, which taught ground attack techniques, very necessary for the move into France. These pilots were equipped with older Hurricanes, but also the faster Typhoons and Mustangs.

Sadly, as with all O.T.U.s, accidents were common, and a full list of incidents is to be found in "Wings over Gloucestershire" by John Rennison. In 1941 a nursing orderly, L.A.C. Payne rescued the pilot of a Miles Master, which had caught fire after a heavy landing, at considerable personal risk, and was later awarded the George Cross. The worst crash was late in the conflict, in 1945, when a Typhoon crashed onto a Nissan Hut, killing the pilot and two ground personnel, and injuring fifteen others. Many other crashes were less serious, and rapid repairs kept the maximum number of aircraft in the skies at any one time.

Many nationalities were trained in the O.T.U.s of Aston Down. In 1940 a special squadron of Yugoslav pilots was trained and equipped with Blenheim bombers, later acquitting themselves well in the Balkan campaigns. Others found on the station included Chinese, Canadians, Rhodesians and Americans serving with the R.A.F. Some of the more extrovert trainees attempted to fly under the Severn railway bridge, en route to the firing ranges of the Bristol Channel, with varying degrees of success!

Aston Down was considered to be fairly safe from enemy attack, although regular inspections of camouflage were carried out, and a dummy field, or Z site, was constructed at Horsley to confuse the Luftwaffe. Only one real “near miss” occurred, in 1942, when a bomb fell on Gypsy Lane, leaving a large, deep crater. This relative safety attracted other units to the base during wartime - No. 9 Ferry Pool, engaged in the delivery of frontline aircraft, 81 Group Communications Flight, and an Ambulance Flight in 1944. A year earlier, a flight of Mitchell Bombers of 180 Sqn. spent a month on the airfield.

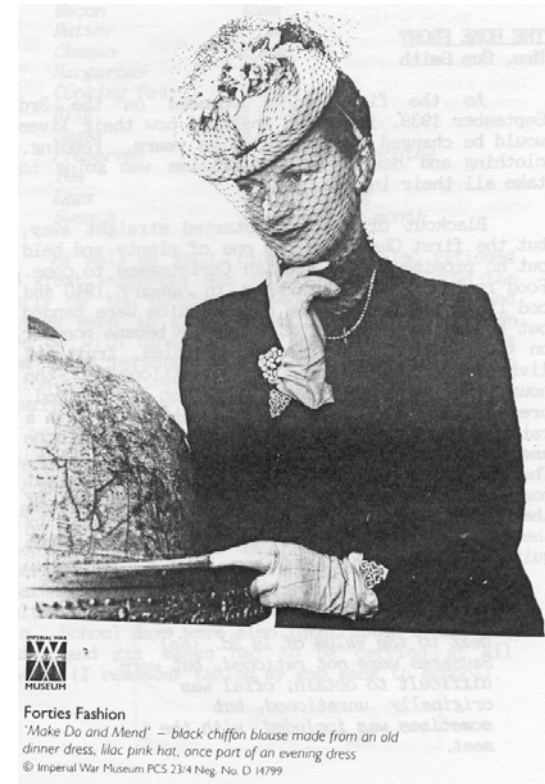
During the war years even the Food Effort was supported, with activities like pig-rearing and hay making, with sheep grazing the more remote parts of the field. The preparation for the Normandy Invasion saw a brief increase in activity, but after V. E. Day Aston Down was to take on another role. It became a gathering place for surplus aircraft. Lancasters, Typhoons and other marques were broken up. Spare parts, Jigs and machine tools from all over the country were sold off for scrap. The task of overseeing all this work was given to 20 M.U., who for so long had worked to keep the aircraft aloft. It was a rather ignominious end to a distinguished wartime career for a non-frontline R.A.F. base.

THE HOME FRONT

Mrs. Sue Smith

As the first siren sounded on the 3rd September 1939, few women realised how their lives would be changed in the next five years. Feeding, clothing and heating their families was going to take all their ingenuity.

Blackout of the home started straight away, but the first Christmas was one of plenty and held out no promise of the spartan Christmases to come. Food rationing was introduced in January 1940 and cod liver oil tablets and orange Juice were handed out to supplement the diet. Rabbits became popular on the menu, and home grown vegetables, fruit and livestock if possible, were



additions to the household. Produce from the garden was salted, preserved and the fruit was made into jam. With a ration of one shell egg, per person, per week, the use of dried egg in cooking became common-place. The population was urged by Potato Pete to eat more vegetables and in actual fact the health of the nation improved. Many of the recipes issued by the Ministry of Food were very tasty, and would be quite acceptable today.

ADULT WEEKLY RATION

Meat to the value of 1s. 2d. (6p)

Sausages were not rationed, but were difficult to obtain; offal was originally unrationed, but sometimes was included with the meat.

| | | | |
|--------|-------|-----------|-------|
| Bacon | 4 ozs | Cheese | 2 ozs |
| Butter | 2 ozs | Margarine | 2 ozs |

| | | | |
|-------------|---------------------|--------|--------------------|
| Cooking Fat | 2 ozs | Tea | 2 ozs |
| Milk | 3 pints | Eggs | One shell egg |
| Sugar | 8 ozs | Sweets | 12 ozs every month |
| Preserves | 1 lb every 2 months | | |

As well as food, clothes were also rationed and great ingenuity was called upon to clothe the family on the points allowed. Good second-hand clothes were in great demand, so children often made do with hand-me-downs and recycled clothing from their parents. Soap and coal were also on ration and the weekly family bath became a regular occurrence - everyone sharing the same water.

With their men away fighting many women were left to cope at home alone, and, as well as having to cope with the shortages, very often the supply of gas and electricity would fail and the meals had to be cooked on an open fire. Nights of broken sleep were spent either in the Anderson shelter or under the stairs awaiting the sound of the "All Clear". Many city women returned from the communal shelter after an air raid to find their homes in ruin. School days were also interrupted by daytime raids, and gas masks had to be carried at all times. (I remember taking my gas mask to school).



Women without dependents were obliged to work either in factories doing war work, as in the munition factories at Quedgeley, on the farms as land girls, or join one of the branches of the armed services. Many "outsiders" came to make their homes in Gloucestershire in this way.

Even after peace was declared in 1945, rationing continued for many years. For countless women their lives had been changed for ever.

WARTIME VISITORS TO MINCHINHAMPTON

Stan and Iris Dyer

In the build-up to the War, in January 1939, Local Authorities were asked to draw up plans for the evacuation of children from vulnerable areas. On September 2nd of that year a group of 500 children from Birmingham came to the Stroud area, some of them to Minchinhampton. During the "Phoney War" many drifted back to the cities, but after the fall of Dunkirk the threat of invasion became very real, and in June 1940 the area played host to over 700 school pupils from Walton-on-the-Naze and Clacton-on-Sea in Essex. Some, with their own teachers, were made welcome at Brimscombe Polytechnic, but other, younger visitors were incorporated into the rolls of Minchinhampton and Amberley Schools.

There were other overseas visitors as well. In 1944 U.S. forces of the General H.Q. Company set up camp on the Great Park, with an array of tents, huts and roads. For a few months the preparations for Operation Overlord, the invasion of mainland Europe, took place in the Cotswolds. G. I.'s, aircrew and even prisoners-of-war were visitors to our small town.

We found it a most enjoyable task getting in touch with the evacuees, and G.I. Berardelli for the exhibition, and we would like to tell you how it all began.

We first heard of evacuees Patricia and Marjorie Thomas when Stan's brother sent him a copy of the Birmingham Evening Mail showing a photograph of Minchinhampton Parochial School in 1939 with these two sisters on it when they were evacuated to Minchinhampton and stayed with Eva and Jesse Kirby in Well Hill. This we followed up by visiting Jesse, who put us in touch with them; the end result was the lovely tribute they wrote for the exhibition.

Deborah Spiers had lodged with Mary Amor in West End and was a name Iris knew, although not her whereabouts. Monica Bond in Windmill Road (who married into the Amor family) contacted Maureen Sears (that was her maiden name) who let us have Deborah's address. When we rang to ask for photographs, we had a nice friendly chat and she too was delighted with what we were doing.

Evacuees from Walton-on-the-Maze, Eva Wyatt and the Wilbys had earlier answered ads. in the Clacton press, sent by Stan and Sheila Bruton on the 50th anniversary of the outbreak of war, so these were easy to contact. The Wilby's tape inspired us to narrate all the other letters as well, so that those with poor eyesight could listen rather than try to read what was on our stands. Making the tape was great fun. Amateurish we admit, but fun all the same, especially when Mr. Schwarz recorded Phil Berardelli's letter with a genuine American accent.

G. I. Phil was contacted through articles in 'The Citizen' which alerted Geoffrey Ellins in Kent. Eventually Phil was written to in Pittsburg. He was thrilled and delighted to be asked to contribute to our exhibition, hence the interesting and quite moving report which we had on display.

Pilot Officer Oren Noah's story came to light literally at the last moment when talking to Poppy Cooke and John Trowill who happened to mention it. A hasty phone call to Harry and Jean Trowill at Chalford and we were invited over to be told the whole story and willingly lent the press cuttings.

The German prisoner-of-war Edmund Bastin was a post-war experience of the Ellins family in the Institute (now the Church Centre). A very shy young man, he had no desire to fight in a war but just wanted to get back home. We came to know him through our lodger Jesse Brown who had Edmund working under him in the canteen at Aston Down. Jesse was allowed to bring him to the Baptist Chapel and George and Minnie Ellins invited him to several meals, and befriended him.

We enjoyed the exhibition immensely, especially meeting so many people who used to live in Minchinhampton and who were interested in all there was to see. Everyone seemed most appreciative, and the feed-back has been most encouraging. We felt quite nostalgic by the end of the weekend, and didn't really want to dismantle anything, wishing it could have stayed up for another week!

Should you be interested, we can supply tape copies for the price of a tape - £1.20.

VICTORY!

VE-DAY CELEBRATIONS IN STROUD DISTRICT "THANKSGIVING AND REJOICING"

On Tuesday May 8th, VE-Day, the people of the Stroud District joined with millions of men and women in all parts of the British Empire in victory rejoicings.

In the surrounding towns and villages there were scenes of enthusiastic joy and thanksgiving. Hardly a building in the district was without its flags and streamers. Bonfires were lit on some of the hilltops. V-signs in electric lights and floodlighting in Stratford Park helped to turn night into day, and music could be heard everywhere".

Stroud Journal Friday May 11th 1945

The celebrations in Minchinhampton were as joyful as elsewhere. A band of people with a barrel organ and monkey made an impromptu collection of £50 for a children's tea and sports. A church service was held, and a bonfire lit in the Market Square.

Friday Street was decorated with beech boughs, renamed "Hero Street" and the oldest resident crowned "Queen of the Street" Chairs were put out, wine drunk from the barrel and a piano was produced for dancing.

In August the Town again celebrated, this time the Victory over Japan. Many residents donned fancy dress and entertained the children. In the evening a torchlight procession made its way to the Park where a bonfire was lit.

"From three o'clock, when the Prime Minister's announcement of the end of hostilities was broadcast, until long after midnight, thousands of men, women and children danced and sang and cheered. Many broke away for a while to give thanks to God attending the special services in the Churches of the town, whilst others joined in a short service conducted from the balcony of the Holloway Institute, Just prior to the King's speech at 9 o'clock."