

MEMORIES OF NEWCHURCH by Brian Lancaster



Brian Lancaster during the war

Being only 4yrs 5mths at the outbreak of the 2nd World War, my mind was too young to differentiate between War and Peace, so it was a natural instinct for me to accept all the limitations that War imposed on us. The following, although not in chronological order, is a brief dossier of how general life was at the time.

Home life

There were very few houses with mod-cons. Water for drinking and washing was from surface water collect in a well and was delivered to the earthenware sink by a hand-operated pump. Hot water facilities were provided by boiling a kettle on a paraffin or Primus stove for general use or fill the clothes washing copper to heat water for a full body wash in an oval zinc bath. Outside loos were usually situated several metres from the back door and consisted of a cupboard type seat with a centralised hole beneath which a large, oval bucket was placed for the collection of unwanted waste. Toilet tissue was by means of the previous weeks Radio Times newspaper (such editions preferred, being that the quality of paper became softer when crumpled in the hands before use)! The bucket was emptied into a hole at the bottom of the garden – Waste washing water was piped into the nearest dyke. Bedtime toilet necessities were provided by adult sized pots (most of which are now used as sweet containers on tables in American homes)!!

Lighting in the homes was mainly by mantled lamps with centre clear glass tube and white globe to spread the light around the living room - elsewhere candles were used. Interior heating in the daily living quarters was by means of a Kitchen stove or open grated fire. Bedroom warmth was by hot water bottles. Brown gummed tape was stuck to the sash framed windows to limit slivers of flying glass from bomb blasts. Thick paper panelled frames were made to size to put in windows to prevent any artificial light showing outside. Car and cycle lights had deflectors fitted to stop the light showing up in the sky. This proved very difficult to see the road on foggy nights.

Anderson air raid shelters were provided to families for external use, made of thick corrugated arched steel sheets which were covered with soil above ground level and a concreted chamber to the depth of approx: 1.5 metres below ground level. Morrison shelters for internal use - consisting of a thick steel topped table with reinforced wire side panels and mattresses beneath for sleeping on. Provisions were delivered: Bakery 3 times a week. Butcher once a week. Groceries once a week.

War years

Air ministry take over Brooker Farm and most of Wills Fm. 2 metre diameter pipes were placed in existing main dykes which were then filled in. Airstrips were laid with coconut matting beneath and rod-reinforced netting pinned to the ground by metal stakes on top. Marsh Airdromes were mainly used during summer months only due to wet weather.

Wooden poles (approx: 6/7metres high) were erected in lines all over the fields of the Marsh as a deterrent to an invasion but these would have proved useless when one Sunday evening a B17 (Flying Fortress of the USAF) made a belly landing across the fields and dykes of Willow Farm land, snapping the poles in half like carrots as it slid over the fields. As my family and I ran across the fields to see where it came to rest, we met one of the crew walking back on the path the aircraft had made and when asking him what he was doing the reply – in a broad American accent was - “I’ve lost my ‘dang’ glove!!!!

These aircraft had been on a bombing raid over Germany and had run out of fuel. This one was trying to land at St Mary’s-in-the-Marsh Airdrome but fell short of the runway by a mile. The aircraft was soon dismantled and taken away by road on long low loaders called ‘Queen Mary’s’ but the two main wing sections which housed the fuel tanks were dragged to the side of the field and left there for some time. Now wartime was a time of rationing of everything and that included petrol for the family car which was an Austin 7 Tourer - so when a small amount of fuel was found in the bottom of those wing tanks, a long rubber hose and 5 gallon can proved very useful for the recovery of a few gallons. Of course there was a difference in octane rating for cars and B17’s - so after a week the Austin 7 had to have all the burnt out valves replaced. Defence from an invasion by sea saw the erection of a high wall of scaffold tubes draped with barbed wire from top to bottom.

Another amusing incident happened when returning home in that same Austin 7 one Sunday evening. Vapour trails high in the clear blue sky indicated that dogfights were going on against German aircraft so mother made father stop the car and put up the canvas roof in case any empty bullet cases fell on us kids in the back. Somehow I don’t think the Canvas hood would have provided much protection!

Of course shell cases from Aircraft and Shrapnel from Antiaircraft shells was quite commonplace over the fields but I never heard of anyone being injured as such plunged down on the fields? Many, many strips of Silver paper were also strewn over the fields by the enemy when the era of Radar began to be developed.

Many aircraft came down over the Marsh area. A Dornier in Bert Wimble’s field, 300 meters from Willow Farm house – and father being in the Special Constabulary quickly put on his peaked hat and - armed with pitchfork in his hand - he ran over to join other farmhands to apprehend the Pilot, it turned out that the pilot was dead but another one of the crew was very much alive as he offered Craven-A cigarettes to the group assembled around him.

A Meshersmitt Fighter came to rest alongside North Fording house, the pilot was unhurt and ran round to the back door and asked for a drink of water – which one of the local constabulary refused to allow him to partake. Of course many crashed landed with pilots trapped within waiting for their ultimate end!!!

The early part of the Battle of Britain proved to be very costly to the RAF in that the German aircraft came into combat out of the Sun - making it difficult for our pilots to see them. One such pilot who was caught that way but as his Hurricane plunged towards the ground he managed to bale out and landed safely half a mile away from where his aircraft disappeared in the ground. After making his way across the fields to see the hole his Hurricane had made he proceeded to our home and had a cup of tea while he waited to be picked up and returned to base (Newchurch Advanced Landing Ground aerodrome). I cannot recall his name but I remember he was a Polish lad who had a mouthful of gold teeth. Like many of the RAF and Army lads we got to know him through his visits to get some fresh eggs and have a cup of tea. One day he called and said it was possible he'd be leaving Newchurch but he'd let us know and say "Good-bye." Some days later that time came when one lunchtime the noise of an aircraft engine brought us out of the backdoor to see this aircraft turn then swoop low overhead twice more, dipping it's wings up and down as it disappeared in the distance. We never saw or heard of our Polish friend again and only hope that he made it through the war.

As for his aircraft, the empty crater was guarded by army personnel and attempts were made to retrieve it using a tripod of scaffold pipes with a block and tackle hand winch – but such proved useless. Nevertheless it had to be guarded day and night and to add a bit of comfort or the lads, father washed the interior of a chicken hut nearby for them to shelter and sleep in. Food was delivered to them in the back of an army lorry and on several occasions mother stopped the vehicle, took the tray of 'dust covered' rice pudding out of the lorry – skimmed off the dust on top then reheated the remainder so that it was hot for the lads. An humanitarian thing to do of course but it was not appreciated by their Commanding Officer when hearing what she was doing! Father was first to take the brunt of the dressing down given by the Officer - but he never got the better of mother who soon told him where to go! The tail wheel of that Hurricane was retrieved many years after the war by the Brenzett Aeronautical Group and can now be seen in their Brenzett museum.

Children were educated in the village school throughout the war years and afterwards and children from St. Mary-in-the-Marsh were conveyed to the school in two taxis when their school was taken over by the Air Ministry and the adjacent airdrome became operational. Everyone was issued with a Gas Mask and children were given special boxes with a loop of string to carry them over their shoulders as they went to school. Small bottles of concentrated orange juice and a jar of Cod Liver Oil and Malt were supplied to give young children necessary vitamins which were not available from fresh fruit, (The Orange juice was palatable - but the Cod Liver Oil and Malt was something that a 'spoon full of sugar' played a great part to 'help the medicine go down'!



*Top row: Mary Ann Waddell, Dolly Fagg, Mary Fagg, Len Lancaster, Alice Fagg, Don Lancaster, Molly Lancaster
Bottom row: Peggy Waddell, June Waddell, Les Waddell, Peter Waddell, Brian Lancaster*

Evacuation was optional but most parents preferred to keep their children together as a family. A blockhouse type shelter was built at the rear of the school but was rarely used. For a youngster it was quite exciting to see Aircraft taking off and landing when going to and from school – but it was not so exciting one mid morning when two German aircraft flew low over the airfield with machine guns blazing. There had been no warning siren but suddenly we heard a rat-a-tat-tat-tat and our teacher's voice shouting "under the desks – Quick", by which time the aircraft had passed overhead and were gone. Within minutes there were parents all around the school to see if we were ok. It appeared the two aircraft had dropped their bombs on Ashford and gave Newchurch airfield a strafing of bullets from their machine guns as they flew back to base which was probably just across the channel in France.

At the time it was said that some bullets had pierced the West door of the church but I'm not sure if this was true. The aircraft had certainly come from that direction and maybe the height of the church had saved the school from being peppered by their machine guns. Such surprise attacks often took place without warning and many times farm workers in the fields raced to the nearest ditches to hide down the banks so that German pilots wouldn't see them.

Dig For Victory

With Merchant ships coming being attacked by enemy U boats, supplies of much needed food was scarce and Winston Churchill advised family's to help the war effort by growing their own vegetables etc; in their gardens. In those days ample ground was attached to each house for the purpose of growing your own Veg'.

Soon the greenery of the Romney Marsh was to become brown as farmers were also encouraged to plough their land to grow cereals and other crops for human consumption. Another crop that was introduced was Flax but this was grown for making clothes from the Fibre in the stem. It became quite a sight to see field upon field of blue in the Spring when the crop was in flower.

At harvest time one Flax Pulling machine with handler was designated to several farms in one area to harvest the Flax (including root), tie it in bundles and when completely dry it was carried and stacked until being collected by lorries in the Autumn and taken to the mills to extract the fibre and weave into material for clothes such as Uniforms for our Forces.

Farms were supplied with Standard Fordson tractors and implements such as Ploughs, Disc Harrows, Drills and others trailed implements were pooled by the War Agricultural Society's of each County and loaned to farmers as required. The Newchurch depot for these implements was at the Forge, just past New Rents. Traction Engine Steam Power for ploughing was contracted out by Link Brothers and this consisted of one traction engine at either end of the field, pulling a 6/7 furrowed tilt plough by a cable which was wound up on a large cylinder beneath the belly of the Traction Engine. Ploughing up of the land need extra labour which was primarily supplied by fire services who brought their Fire Engines and Pumps with them in case of emergencies. Young men on farms were exempt from being enlisted to fight in the war.

The Women's Land Army played a great part in helping farmers gather in the harvest and one of the best groups of girls came from the Mills in Yorkshire. We had as many as 8 at Willow Farm and they were some of the very best workers that any farmer could ever have. Ultimately these were replaced by men who objected to fight in the war and of them I will pass no comment.

Doodle Bomb Era

Artillery Guns and Searchlights were placed in pairs all over the Marsh and to this day two prefabricated cookhouse and sleeping quarter buildings can be seen at the junction of Pickney Bush Lane and Newchurch Road. One of these Guns was placed at the rear of Willow Farm and one night I was woken up as this gun was fired. Father immediately came into the room and as he opened the window he shouted “Don’t shoot that you fools, it’s one of ours on fire”! Next day as we made our daily visit to collect Swill (food waste) for our pigs, we were soon to learn it wasn’t “one of our planes on fire” – it was in fact the first Doodle Bug (Germany’s New Secret Weapon the V1) to cross our shores and they gave me one of the empty shell cases they fired that night as souvenir. It is now on show in Newchurch Parish church History project.

For me as a child the Doodle Bug era was more frightening than the droves of Bombers that flew over during the night. We knew the aircraft were going further afield, but when the Doodle Bugs engine stopped – you just didn’t know where it would finally explode. At the beginning of this era we spent many nights sleeping in our Anderson Shelter and we often waited ‘with baited breath’ as we heard the Doodle Bug engine stop and then heard a swishing sound as it glided down through the air to the final ‘bang’! By the third week we got more used to these ‘Bugs’ and so did our pilots as they started exploding them in the air or flew alongside to get the slipstream of their aircrafts wingtip to gently tilt the Doodle Bugs wingtip up and - in most cases - turn it back over the sea to explode. To the best of my knowledge I recollect Pilot Officer Beamont had a yellow nosed Aircraft and one particular day he exploded one Doodle Bug in the air over Burmarsh way and then turned another back over the sea to prevent it reaching its ultimate target which was towards the London area.

Entertainment

Apart from the wireless there was no other entertainment – No TV – No PCs – and in those days for kids it was a case of what you never had you never missed. Parents involvement of games and amusements for their children was very much the order of the day and, to tell you the truth, I think we grew up to be better children for it. I remember my brother, sister and I put a lot of trust in our parents. And they put a lot of trust in us!

The Black Bull often arranged dances for the lads and lasses of the village in the small building at the rear of the Pub and social evenings were held in the loft of a Tithe barn that stood on the corner in the grounds of Frostlands farm. Old Tyme dances combined with ballroom dances were the order of the night with the inclusion of the Jitter Bug and the Pali-glide which brought ‘merry’ people closer together towards the end of the evening. Live music was provided many locals (my father, sister and I) and sometimes by talented RAF and Army personal.



Brian Lancaster’s father: Leonard who used to play at the Newchurch Dances