The 75th Anniversary of VE Day
8th May 2020

A Virtual Commemoration
The year 2020 marks the 75th Anniversary of VE Day on the 8th May. The original plan was for great commemorations to take place across the country, involving as many as possible of the ‘Greatest Generation’, those who lived, served or fought in the Second World War.

Sadly, this ‘Greatest Generation’ was one of the most vulnerable to COVID-19, and so the Government decided correctly that any events involving mass gatherings had to be cancelled. Many of our members were planning imaginative heritage displays, historical events within their communities or finding varied ways to commemorate 75 years of peace.

The Northamptonshire Heritage Forum committee were still very keen to mark this important anniversary and we took the opportunity to mount a virtual exhibition of memories from Northamptonshire. Member organisations, societies and individual look within their own personal possessions, their organisation’s collections or within their community and found something which told the story of an individual person, or a family, or a group of people that relates to something to do with the Second World War.

They are collected here with grateful thanks to all contributors and to those who lived through such dark times.
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In common with the rest of the country, Northamptonshire made the most of the two-days victory holidays, with bands, processions, dancing, parties in the streets, festivities at home and in public and many people went to church for the VE day services.

From early morning on Tuesday the crowds grew steadily, at Northampton people wandered about in happy groups or sat on the steps of the Market Square fountain or on the bandstand which had been hastily erected. Just before 10am the band of the Northamptonshire Regiment swung into the Square and the sound of the music drew even more crowds.

There were no buses but cyclists, mainly of the younger generation, crowded the streets, steering an erratic course as they gazed upwards at the gay display of flags and bunting. After tea, the celebrations really got under way, not unaided by an ample supply of beer rushed to the licensed premises throughout the day by men who worked that others might drink.

When the Regimental Band arrived on the Square for its’ evening concert, there was already a very large crowd which grew when the music and dancing started.

Mr Churchill’s broadcast was relayed in several places in Northampton. There was a big crowd outside the Town Hall, where the receiving set of Mr W Harris, the Town Hall keeper, was brought into use.

Around the county: Immediately following the Prime Minister’s declaration a peal of bells was rung from the Parish Church at Wollaston while Wollaston Silver Prize Band assembled at the Square and marched to the school playground for music and dancing. A large crowd of dancers assembled in the Parochial Room for a dance. Music was supplied by Leon and his band. Just before midnight the band headed a torchlight procession from the school playground, with members of the national Fire Service as torch-bearers. Practically all the parish joined in and marched to the Square for more dancing and singing while fireworks and bonfires added to the gaiety of the proceedings.

In Wellingborough singing crowds, dancing in the streets and children’s tea parties were the order. The fun started when the Sea Cadet Band made a tour of the town in the early afternoon. Fireworks and a torchlight parade added to the excitement and the revelry continued into the early hours of the morning of VE Day Plus One.
Kettering celebrated the victory holiday in a spirit of sober thanksgiving and rejoicing. Flags and bunting were everywhere and victory peals were rung on the bells of the Parish church. The schools were closed for VE Day as were local factories. Large crowds of children, many carrying flags, made their way to Wicksteed Park. Messrs Wallis and Linnell, clothing manufacturers gave their employees a party at which a huge bonfire, on which was an effigy of Hitler, was lit. Special services were held at most places of worship but the outstanding public assembly was the town’s Service of Thanksgiving on the Market place which took place on the day following V-Day. It was intended that this service should be a united one, but, as on previous occasions in recent years when efforts had been made for Nonconformist ministers and Anglican clergy to assemble on the same platform, the latter declined and the only representative of the Established Church was the Rector of Barton Seagrave.

Weedon Bec was gaily decorated and the bells of the church rang victory peals. In the evening a united thanksgiving service was held at the church. The day was brought to a close with a dance at the Ordnance Depot.

At Daventry, the Rector addressed a packed congregation made up of members of all war-time services and said “We must not regard the victory we are celebrating today as the end; rather must we regard it as the beginning of a new era”. Earlier there had been a massed victory parade through the town.

In Brixworth VE Day was marked by a Thanksgiving Service. Later in the evening a victory social was held, music being provided by a radiogram loaned by Mr Papworth. Many games and old fashioned dances were enjoyed by young and old of the village.

At Brackley there was an open-air service in the park. Dancing in the streets was popular and there was a bonfire in the park. There were children’s sports, comic cricket match and community singing.

The “highest” award for decorations must go to an energetic person or persons at Daventry BBC station, for on Tuesday morning flags were proudly flying from two of the 500 foot masts”.

Other headlines:

Private Charles F Martin and his brother Private Alfred Martin of Moulton arrived home within a few days of one another. Charles had been in the army for 17 years and was captured at Dunkirk. He was a prisoner in Stalag 20A in Poland. He endured a 900 miles march before being released by the Americans. His brother was captured in April 1943 during the fighting in Africa. He was also released by the American last month after being a prisoner in Stalag 4D. A brother, Sergt W O Martin is still a prisoner in Japanese hands and another brother, Pte Ron Martin, is serving with the Pioneer Corps in London. The father of these boys served in the last war and joined up in this war.

Trooper A. G. Robinson, a prisoner just returned from Germany, escaped from imprisonment in Italy at the armistice, and spent six months hidden by Italian patriots in the mountains before being recaptured by Italian Fascists and sent to Germany. A native of Yardley Hastings, he joined up in April 1939 and was captured at Tripoli. After 14 days forced marching, he was liberated by the Americans at Dubon in April. The village was decorated for his return and friends turned out to welcome him home.

Another Northampton man, Pte Rial, has marched 600 miles in 11 weeks and has also returned home. He was captured after he had been wounded at Vimy Ridge in May 1940 and was liberated by the American Army near Hanover. He is a regular soldier and joined the Northamptonshire Regiment in 1931.
A gentle man remembered

By Robin Matthews

Wing Commander Brian J Spragg DFC

Born in Weedon, Northamptonshire, in 1923 and educated at Daventry Grammar School and later at St. Andrews University.

Brian gained his wings in 1943. His final training was in Clewiston, Florida. He then joined 257 Squadron in Warmwell, Dorset, to fly Typhoons. He flew 163 operations during the second World War during which time he was shot down twice over the Dutch islands.

In February 1948 Brian sailed to the Middle East, joining 6 Squadron. Flying Tempest V1s, his main job was protecting the British Army withdrawal from Palestine. One of his most memorable sorties was in 1948 when he was engaged in a dog fight over Palestine with Elizer Welshman, who later became President of Israel.

In 1952 Brian volunteered for secondment to the USAF in Kimpo, for action in Korea flying F86s with 4th FG334 Squadron. He flew 50 operations over Korea.

Brian returned to the UK in 1965 and after further periods abroad became Commander at RAF Alconbury and in 1969 became CO to Gan (Maldives). In 1972 when attached to HQ Strike Command at High Wycombe, his service career came to an end and the start of a well earned retirement for the newly promoted Wing Commander B. J. Sprang DFC.

His retirement years were spent in Great Brington, only a few miles from his birth place, where he was a hugely respected and popular part of the local community until his death in 2013.
A little bit of Old England!
The village that celebrated VE day, 25 days late
By Gwyn Lewis

The following is a newspaper article about the village of Long Buckby and VE day.

Long Buckby (Northants) Saturday

Today is VE day at Long Buckby and the 2,400 inhabitants of this one street village are holding celebrations that the rest of Britain have almost forgotten. Long Buckby explained the delay. Mr Frank Wells, the village painter, confessed “we are too slow here to walk last.”

But men who organised today’s village gala repudiated this slur on Long Buckby. One of them, Mr. Frank Biddell, the village greengrocer, said “Mr. Churchill should have given us more notice. When Long Buckby does things it likes to do them well and take time to think”.

There is in fact, nothing sleepy about Long Buckby, ten miles from Northampton. It has four boot and shoe factories and claims to be the only place where hand-sewn footwear is still made. And Long Buckby likes its victory celebrations to be of the same high standard.

When the rest of Britain celebrated VE day and the day following, over three weeks ago, the failure of Long Buckby to mark the historic occasion rankled in the mind of Mr. Jack Cooper, the billeting officer. He bought the matter up at the next meeting of the local comforts fund committee. Long Buckby went into action.

Committees totalling 100 men and women of the village were formed. The Town Crier, Bill Coleman (village chimney sweep), swept through Long Buckby ringing his bell and calling the good folk to rally to the cause. Long Buckby responded nobly. A celebration fund of £89 11s. 1d was collected.

High spot of the celebrations took the form of sports and a special tea for the 310 children of the village.

Mr George West of the “Horseshoes” Inn went to Coventry, 20 miles away where he knew of some bunting and other decorations that today make the village square a brave sight.

The village’s two bands, the Long Buckby Town Band and the Long Buckby Temperance Band forgot their rivalry and amalgamated for the celebrations.

This afternoon the sun is shining and Long Buckby is celebrating in a big way. Almost everybody is in fancy dress with Mr. Cooper in a moth eaten top hat – one of the many toppers produced for the occasion – acting as starter in the children’s races.

I patted a little girl’s large frilly bonnet and asked how she was enjoying herself. There came from beneath the bonnet a rich and fruity male voice saying “Fine, but how I could do with a pint!” The little girl was 50 year old 4ft 6ins. Billy York, who enjoys local fame as a retired jockey. After that nothing surprised me – not even the village fishmonger disguised as a witch.

Long Buckby may be slow in starting but it finishes in front.
In 1939 Toller Congregational Church had a pacifist minister, the Reverend Caudwell. A weekly Peace Pledge Meeting was held in the school rooms in Meeting Lane. There were about twenty in the group and Allan was a member along with evacuated teachers. Pacifists were generally ridiculed and considered cowards, but because of the aforesaid Christian tradition in Kettering, they were not ill treated. Meetings also took place at the home of Margaret Taylor in St Peter's Avenue. Allan being a Christian member of the War Registers International, he made the decision not to take up arms and chose to become a contentious objector.

At the age of eighteen Allan joined the Pacifist Service Unit and joined the Sanitary Squad who were responsible for cleaning out the night shelters in High Street Shadwell, London during the Blitz. At night the doors of the shelter under St Paul’s Church in the crypt would be shut and when they were opened in the morning the stench was unbearable. He had to go in and clean up and took up smoking to obliterate the smell.

During the day he did rescue work, he was billeted at China Mission and soon after his arrival in London he was operational during a particularly
heavy raid In that carnage he dug mutilated bodies out of the rubble. The terrible scenes that he witnessed and memories of the rescue work that he carried out never left him.

One of Allan’s particularly dreadful memories was seeing scenes of people being burned alive and he remembered going to a factory to have a meal when the fellow opposite him suddenly slumped onto the table a piece of shrapnel went straight through the back of his head.

After his experiences in London he asked to do medical work in either Coventry or Birmingham. In an interview he was told that unless he could drive, he would be of no use. Admitting that he could not, the person who interviewed him provided him with a cattle truck and said “There you are, see how you go and come back when you think you can drive.” This did not deter him and two days later, with practice in a cattle truck along Warkton Lane Kettering, he declared that he could drive! He joined the rescue service with the Birmingham Casualty Unit in 1941.

Another of Allan’s horrendous encounters was when he picked up a girl of about his own age only to have her leg fell off in his hand and find that she was dead. He was violently sick. He would have to take bodies to the mortuary where 300 corpses lay. The dreadful stench of death and human decay he found unbearable. One night after only an hour’s sleep, he woke up and got dressed thinking it was time to get up. His nerves were shattered and playing havoc with him.

Allan continued to want to be of service, so he applied to War Resisters’ International and became part of the ‘Overseas Column of the Civil Defence Reserve’, destined for service with Field Marshal Montgomery’s 21st Army. Training took place in the grounds of Chateau Impney and in October they were ordered aboard a flat bottomed boat at Tilbury. Throughout the night he lay on deck watching the Doodlebugs making their way to England. His first job as dispatch rider was to deliver the column to a small village called Reet some twelve miles from Antwerp.

On the 16th December they were alerted having only rested for a few hours. It was an icy winters day when at 3.30 pm nearly all of the 1200 seats of the cinema Rex were occupied as the audience watched the film Buffalo Bill with Flemish sub titles when disaster struck in the heaviest of the V 2 bombing attacks. The magnificent hall was suddenly transformed to a heap of ruins. It was dark by the time he arrived. Absolute chaos, awesome and macabre scenes were greatly in evidence as Catholic priests popped out of the debris in their black cassocks, having given extreme unction to the dying and dead. After a week it was possible to provide figures regarding the victims, 567 people died in this one
incident 291 people were badly mutilated including 87 civilians and 194 soldiers.

On VE Day Allan raced to the top of Divisional Headquarters to watch the jubilant crowds below who were wild with joy and excitement Allan, knew that the day for peace was Approaching and when it came, he had mixed emotions After VE Day he witnessed terrible scenes of men returning from Germany The fact that some of them had collaborated with the Germans provoked many atrocities Men were hanged from lamp posts girls had their hair cut off Allan and his group were invited to see a Belgian concentration camp before being demobbed.

There seemed little to celebrate, and this is when he decided that he must assist with the task of helping with the rehabilitation of the millions of displaced persons.

Allan volunteered to join a team of Service Civil Volontaire (SCI). This organisation was founded by a Swiss pacifist, Pierre Ceresole. Its main aim is to promote peace, justice and understanding between people and nations through voluntary work. One of the objectives of allowing this co operation between the British and the Germans was to demonstrate democracy to young Germans who had spent their formative years in dictatorship. There was thought to be no better way of doing this than by letting them take part in International work camps.

Allan was briefed on Operation Swallow by the local commander and sent to Menden Retracing his steps along the Rhine, it was getting late and curfew was still in force when Allan was asked to proceed to the railway station some miles away to meet local officials including German Red Cross, various voluntary organisations including Catholic and Protestant representatives.

Walking through the station he encountered the tired and haggard faces as refugees clambered from the high railway wagons exposed to the elements The living, dying and dead travelled together in the same wagons Young and old, women and children crying After weeks spent in transit across Germany and Poland, many were suffering from frostbite With bundles on their backs, some walked bare foot, others had terrible sores and many were infested with lice and bugs They were in a bad state of malnutrition, degenerated to mere skeletons and many of them had dysentery Ambulances took away many of the dead and those needing medical attention

Those who were left were fed People were stripped of their clothing with no form of privacy to be examined and deloused It was a pathetic sight and it seemed that normal life had been lowered to the level of animal husbandry.

Allan confessed that he had no experience on which to draw or training to help him for what he was about to experience. He was instructed to examine them and put them through the delousing process, he felt unable to submit them to this dreadful ordeal further dispersing them into former slave camps where conditions were appalling. Each was given a blanket, and before the last human cargo was processed, they were informed that the next train would be expected in a few hours.

Allan’s final words on the subject of war and peace “The British people have been accused of many things over the years, but it has never been said that we were vindictive or bore malice against those who were vanquished.

The people of Britain were amongst those who helped to support these unfortunates who, through no fault of their own were homeless, cold, under-nourished and utterly miserable They provided clothing and commodities to sustain these people in Europe, showing whatever rivalries may have existed, we still firmly believe in and practice those humanitarian principles which are the basis of any sane society. The world was never in greater need of such examples.”

During the last months of his life, in 1997 Allan reflected on his war time experiences and on the present day continuing conflicts

“Speaking from the experience of my whole life, I still hold my conviction that war is a crime against humanity, and that if as much effort was put into peace as it is into war, it would not be necessary to take up arms”

Allan Page 1921 1997
Boots

By Debra Cox, Public Programme Manager, Northampton Museums & Art Gallery

During the Second World War, manufacturers in Northampton mobilised to produce uniforms, ammunition, boots and shoes. A range of different wartime boots and shoes were made across the various shoe factories in the town.

These included the ‘Escape boot’ made by Haynes and Cann in 1944. This boot was designed by a member of Haynes and Cann staff. When forced to bail out over enemy territory the pilot could cut away the suede leg using the penknife housed in a pocket inside the leg. This left a civilian-style Oxford shoe – to help the pilot blend in and avoid capture.

Image Courtesy of Northampton Museums and Art Gallery
The Second World War saw both Boughton House and its surrounding park requisitioned for a variety of uses. Several Army detachments were billeted at the site and 43 acres of the Park were taken over by the military, causing extensive damage during tank exercises.

The house itself was initially utilised by the British Museum as a safe repository at the outset of war. Some 12 tons of artefacts were housed here, including the coin and medal collection, medieval enamels, Chinese porcelain, Roman glass, Iron Age pottery, Egyptian papyri, tomb paintings and other treasures. The 9th Duke of Buccleuch always enjoyed sharing the fanciful memory that “in the blackout one stumbled over mummies of incredible rarity”.

In August 1939 Westminster Abbey sent to Boughton 9 giltbronze memorial effigies including those of Queen Eleanor of Castile, Henry III, Edward III, Richard II, Queen Anne of Bohemia and Henry V. They were moved to Mentmore late in 1941 when the US Air Force began using nearby Grafton Underwood airfield and the Corby steelworks became a potential target.

Hutments were built by Porter’s Lodge to accommodate staff from the nearby airfield and for use as general stores, a medical depot and by an American Quartermaster battalion, which used the site to train and equip mobile field units in bread baking. Fifty five bakery units passed through Boughton Park before going on to serve in Europe.

The eight museum staff in the house seemed to have had too much time on their hands and tensions soon rose between them and the house staff. The housekeeper and housemaid; looking after “a very large house already stacked with treasures” worked long hours looking after the visitors - cleaning the rooms, supplying both afternoon tea and a cooked supper rather than just high tea. They complained of “receiving no thanks, only complaints”. The museum staff resentfully chopped some wood but “never helped with the washing up or with the garden”.

The Grafton Underwood airfield was originally constructed for use by the RAF but in 1942 the airfield became home to the United States Army Air Force with the runways lengthened to accommodate B-17 bombers. Bombardment groups began flying
from Grafton Underwood in November 1942, attacking key targets in France, Germany and the Low Countries. The 97th Group is famous for flying the first heavy bomber mission of the war.

In June 1944 installations beyond the Normandy beachhead were attacked, disabling airfields and communications in support of the Allied ground troops. From Grafton Underwood the USAF also struck targets in Holland to aid the final Allied assault across the Rhine in March 1945.

At the end of the war the area by Porter’s Lodge was turned into Prisoner of War Camp 259, “Weekley Camp”, housing 2,000 German prisoners. Repatriation began in 1946 and the camp finally closed in Summer 1948 leaving no trace of its existence.

For first-hand descriptions of Boughton as a prison camp we rely on the remarkable memory of Captain Stanley Perry, the 23 year-old adjutant officer who arrived in 1945. He is over 95 years old and returned to visit Boughton in 2017, when he drew a detailed map of the camp from memory – 72 years later.

A German lecturer visiting the camp commented: “Although the prisoners are housed in tents there is a feeling of quiet happiness in the Camp and every single man the present writer has spoken to is full of praise and gratitude.... It is built among beautiful old trees. I, as a German, was deeply grateful for what I was privileged to see.”

After the War, the airfield was used for the refurbishment and sale of ex-military vehicles, which the local residents were all too happy to drive. The airfield was finally closed in 1959.

In 1977, a memorial was erected to the air crews and a commemorative avenue of Wisconsin Elms, many dedicated to the memory of individual airmen, was planted along the line of the former main runway of the airfield which had crossed the Grafton-Geddington Road. A stained glass window featuring a B17 bomber from the 384th Group of the United States 8th Air Force was placed in St James's Church, Grafton Underwood.
Brixworth Celebrates the End of the War

By Pauline Kirton, Brixworth History Society.

VE DAY was marked in Brixworth by a united Thanksgiving service, held in All Saints’ Church and led by the vicar, the Reverend Freeman and the Methodist Church was represented by Mr. West who read the lesson. There was also a parade of the Defence Services which was led by Mr. Griffiths who represented the British Legion and Mr. Thomp- son. A collection was made on behalf of the Restoration of Churches Fund.

Street parties were held all over the village and a victory social was held in the Village Hall. The music came from a radiogram lent by Mr. Papworth, the school master. There was also an MC. All ages in the village listened to the King’s speech and enjoyed the dances and games.

The funds raised provided children’s and old peoples’ parties.

On the Wednesday children’s victory tea parties were held all over the village including Spratton Lane and New Street. Sports and games took place on the recreation grounds. At the time the largest sports ground was in Holcot Road, where the football club was based. Later that evening a victory bonfire took place and every child received a threepenny piece.

In addition, on the 8th May 1946, there was a Thanksgiving
The victory parade continuing round the village past Brixworth Hall grounds.

Service at the St. David’s Recreation Ground (which later became the main ground), followed by other celebrations which included a Fancy-Dress parade, sports events in the afternoon and a social in the evening as the leaflet opposite shows.

This picture shows children in St. David’s Close celebrating the end of the war.
During the Second World War the large Victorian house, Broomhill, on the outskirts of Spratton was owned by Mr Leslie Church, the Chairman of Church and Company, Shoe Manufacturers. In 1941 Mr and Mrs Church moved into the groom’s quarters and let the main house to Blagdens, a small firm from London, who had been bombed out of their offices.

Blagdens came with all their staff and stayed until Broomhill became an annexe to Northampton General Hospital in June 1943. Here patients were able to recuperate after their operations. After 6th June 1944 only military patients were admitted and Mrs Church, a VAD, was able to help with the nursing.

The house took a maximum of 40 soldiers and the regime was strict. There is a story that some of the soldiers ‘escaped’ by climbing down the wisteria from the upper bedrooms and walking across the fields for a drink in one of the village pubs, The Chequers. Some of the young women who were also in the pub at the time remembered vividly the lively evenings that were had singing round the piano!
Cyril Arthur Chinnery

We have these intriguing images – enjoy and if you can help, we will pass on the information.

I have my father’s discharge papers along with other service records, medals, oak leaf and photos. He served in the desert and in Italy. He was Cyril Arthur Chinnery born 12 May 1920. He died at the age of 90.

One thing that has puzzled me on the Release Leave Certificate (attached) was the comment “requiring the highest intelligence and a still tongue”. It was the “still tongue” that was interesting. I think from a comment from my uncle that my father had something to do with troop movements while in Italy.

He was a Corporal and in January 1946 was promoted to P/A/Sgt. GHQ is mentioned, but I think that was just the awarding authority. He continued to serve in Italy for a few months after the war ended.

The other puzzle as I went thorough everything was who was the woman in two photographs with different, but affectionate, messages. Chin was my father’s nickname. I wondered whether she was Fausta Truffa, Italian soprano, who was still singing a few years ago. Was this a singing star signing photos for the troops or a more personal memento? My Italian hairdresser could only translate and not identify.
In 1940 there was a real danger of invasion and a Home Guard was formed of those men who were either too old or too young to enlist or who were in ‘reserved’ occupations. Their job was to delay the enemy for long enough for the regular army to come and take over. To begin with, their weapons were whatever they could lay their hands on, but later they were issued with more conventional rifles.

In Spratton it was the task of the Home Guard to patrol the village and to guard important spots from Creaton to Brixworth. Among those who volunteered were veterans of the 1914-1918 war (Archibald and Ebenezer Copson), shopkeepers (Percy Richardson) and landlords (Ernest Bryant of The Fir Tree).

Back row: Harold Manning (Timmy), George Billingham, Mr Davis & Mr Biggar (from Bladens shippers & exporters, Broomhill), Don Pateman, Micky Cook, Lewis Dickens
2nd row from back: Bard Leeson, Cyril Perkins, Ron Broughton, Francis Butcher, Pop Dickens, Jim Griffin, Ron Bell, Freddy Chapman
2nd row from front: Lance Corporal Alf (Mac) Macaness, Corporal Percy Richardson (kept the Post Office/Grocer), Sergeant Ebenezer Copson, Archibald Copson, Major Flint (Commanding Officer), 1st Lieutenant Ernie Bryant (Second in Command, landlord of Fir Tree), Sergeant Walter Wykes, Lance Corporal Bill Adams, Alf Smith
Front row: Ron Pateman, Bobby Manning, George Hayter, Charlie Manning, Len Wykes
Major Flint (formerly of the 20th Lancashire Fusiliers) was in command with the landlord of The Fir Tree as his second in command. Apparently Major Flint stored bombs in the outbuildings of his headquarters and home ‘Rathgar’ (now the Old White Horse Inn). Despite his assurance that the detonators were missing, his neighbours were not amused!

Spratton hardly suffered at all from bombing during the war. Some villagers remembered enemy planes jettisoning left over bombs which fell in a field near the Brixworth Road and killed some hens. Some unexploded bombs were found between Spratton and Brixworth and the road was closed for several weeks. One night towards the end of the war people heard the sound of a flying bomb passing over Spratton. It came down in Creaton and hit the butcher’s shop but no-one was hurt. That evening a dance was being held at the Village Hall with Mr Ebenezer Copson as the master of ceremonies. Despite his urging people to stay and continue dancing, most were upset by the sound of the bomb and left to go home to their families.

The village was kept awake the night Coventry was bombed. There was the noise of hundreds of bombers passing overhead as they flew in from the east and the muffled sound of many explosions. The sky was red with light from the city on fire and in the morning the acrid smell of burning was carried into Spratton on the breeze.
My Father, Geoff Hand, joined the RAF as a mechanic before the War started in 1937. He was in the 83rd Squadron based in Scampton working on Handley Page Hampden planes. He also served in South Africa for three years. I attach photos of him in uniform, working on a plane and on horseback in South Africa.

My Mother, Joan Phipps, joined the WAAF's in February 1943 and served until October 1944. She trained as a cook in the Officer's Mess. She married Geoff on 1st July 1944 and they honeymooned locally at a hotel in Foster’s Booth because it was too dangerous to travel to London as arranged.

My Father was discharged from the RAF with a duodenal ulcer and my Mother was given a compassionate discharge from the WAAFS in October 1944 so she could look after him.
Holdenby House Education

Their Educational Department run WWII educational visits for Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 children (Aged 5-11 years old). Started in the 1980’s the programme has now seen over 200,000 children visit Holdenby to experience a variety of different subjects, but our Evacuee Day is definitely our most popular subject with pupils and teachers alike.

The Evacuee day is set in 1942, with the children being received at the Holdenby Evacuee Centre. A selection of characters will then teach the children a variety of hands on activities that will help them during their visit.

Mrs North will show the children how to make Woolton Pie, and a range of other seasonal wartime foods, she also explains to them about the weekly ration. Mrs Fortescue-Oliver needs help with her knitting and rag rugs for her Make-Do-and-Mend Drive. Stella, our land army girl, or Mr Jampton, our Air Raid Warden, will show the children how to keep safe, explaining about the Air Raid Shelter and Gas Masks.

The Major, convalescing from a war wound, will talk about the items he carries in his kitbags and Commander Bennett, of the St John Ambulance will teach the children some emergency First Aid. After lunch there is a sing-along of classic wartime songs to cheer everyone up before the children go to their host families, back home.
Children and teachers alike are encouraged to dress in the clothes that would have been worn in the 1940’s, the children often dress as evacuees and some even bring along their name tags and kit bags.

We also have the article on display in the house, although it relates more to WWI than WWII. The article documents the wedding of Mr George Hugh Lowther and Miss Sheila Foster, parents to James Lowther, the custodian of Holdenby House.

They were married on Armistice Day 1938, marking the end of WWI, just one year before the outbreak of WWII. George Lowther was already in the Army in The Life Guards, hence the soldiers making an arch of swords. After the war had broken out, he along with his regiment served in Palestine.
This photo is of my much loved Grandad, Jack Dermott, who served in both the World Wars. Whilst serving with the 25th Field Regiment, Royal Artillery, he was captured at Tobruk on 18.6.1942 and became a PoW until 1.6.1945. During those three long years in captivity, probably to combat boredom, he decorated and engraved what little kit he had.

Here is his aluminium cigarette case, complete with generously filled roll ups. On the front and back he has engraved symbols representative of the Allies, the Union Flag, Stars and Stripes, and the Hammer and Sickle. Also, Big Ben, the White House and the Kremlin, with a Spitfire (possibly). This is just one of the many possessions we have from his wartime. VE Day for him must have been very sweet; it meant he would be coming home at last.
As we approach the 75th anniversary of VE Day on 8th May this year, they planned to have a small display in their Heritage Centre about the World War II ‘features’ in and around the village, and some of the people involved on the Home Front.

A Home Guard was established early on and this picture shows a small group of the men (and boys) in uniform and with their rifles. The picture came from the late Jim Bollans who was in the Home Guard. Those in the photo are: back row (L to R) Reg Beedham, Jim Bollans, Ernie Foster, Norman Roberts, Jeff Henson; and front row (L to R) Claude Ingrey (Captain), George Blake, Arthur Bird, name not known, Frank Milford (Sgt).

The Home Guard had the use of our Village Hall – itself a memorial building from the First World War – for their weekly drills and practices and for storing their equipment. The Village Hall Minute Books record that, occasionally, the Home Guard got into hot water. Light fittings were broken during rifle training and blackout blinds were taken down and used to light fires!

There was even more concern when it was discovered that live ammunition was being stored in...
the cinema projection room, which was right above the main entrance to the hall. The Hall was busy with weekly fundraising dances, variety concerts and the like and the Home Guard were asked to move their practices, equipment and ammunition to the lower floor of the building where it was deemed safer!

Jim Bollans recalled the Home Guard practices were on Sunday mornings, after which the men would retire for a pint in The Wheel Inn pub just at the top of the lane running up from the Village Hall. When on duty, the Home Guard carried out nightly patrols around the village, five or six of them taking it in turns each night. They would go up to the woods near the A43 and sometimes over the cricket field – north of the road to Apethorpe, between the Willowbrook river and the railway line – and up onto the Wansford Road to the airfield. Jim Bollans was there when Coventry was being bombed and could see it clearly as the bombing was so bad.

Another group of wartime volunteers in the village were those who became Air Raid Protection wardens, First Aiders, Fire Fighters and Stretcher-bearers. We have a handwritten list of these people that has survived from March 1940.

The list tells us the ARP Wardens' Post was in Mr Elliott's house at the crossroads in the centre of the village and the First Aid Point was at the doctor's house, now 19 West Street. A note at the bottom of the list gives advice to householders: gas masks should be in perfect order and easy to get at; as little furniture as possible should be in upper rooms and attics; and a bucket of sand and dry earth should be kept handy for smothering incendiary bombs.

Happily, no bombs fell on the village.

From the start of World War II young women from all over the country were joining the Women’s Land Army. Some of them found themselves serving here in King’s Cliffe, accommodated in the WLA Hostel established in King’s Cliffe House (now 31 & 31A West Street), which had been requisitioned for the purpose. From there, they were sent out to work on farms in and around King’s Cliffe. Many of them had no previous experience of farm work and very little training before being “thrown in at the deep end”. Though the Land Army ‘girls’ came from far and wide across the country, several of them would later marry and settle in King’s Cliffe.
This photo was taken on 9th May 1945 – the day after VE Day – when a group of the Land Army ‘girls’ was relaxing in the garden, sitting on the steps of the tennis courts.

A major wartime feature on the edge of the village was the airfield established on an area of flat farmland on the south side of the road from King’s Cliffe to Wansford. The farmland was requisitioned from the Howard family who lived and farmed at Huskisson’s Lodge at the foot of Wansford hill.

In autumn 1941, the airfield opened as a second satellite to RAF Wittering and RAF No 266 Squadron operated from there that year. From July to October 1942, the New Zealand No 485 Squadron flew from King’s Cliffe airfield. Equipped with Spitfires, they were one of the first squadrons to be involved in low-level operations over northern France and Holland, targeting canals, railways, marshalling yards and roads. They also provided fighter escort for daylight bombing raids.

In January 1943, the USAAF 56th Fighter Group arrived at King’s Cliffe followed in August that year by the USAAF 20th Fighter Group. The airfield became USAAF ‘Station 367’ until the end of hostilities in 1945 when it was returned to the RAF and the skies over the village fell quiet.

In 1945, on 1st August which was Armed Forces Day, the 20th Fighter Group opened up the airfield for local people to visit and look around. This photo shows a large group of village children and some
mothers on that Open Day, and a queue of others waiting to clamber on board ‘007’ – A B-17 Flying Fortress

American airmen completed 312 combat missions from King’s Cliffe.

In 1946/7 the airfield buildings served a different purpose: they were used by the RAF as a reception and transit camp for 28,000 German Prisoners of War being repatriated. Then in the early 1950s the airfield site was used as a storage depot for large numbers of bombs.

After the airfield site closed in the late 1950s, the runways were dug up, but other traces of the airfield still exist. These include the concrete base of a Callendar hangar in which, on 3rd October 1944, Glenn Miller and his American Airforce Band played what was to be his last airfield hangar concert. On 15th December that year Glenn Miller was reported missing whilst on a mission. Fifty years later, a memorial was erected here to commemorate his final airfield concert. It stands on the concrete base of the hangar in which he played.

King’s Cliffe Airfield itself and all the men who served there are commemorated by a fine memorial erected by the King’s Cliffe Airfield Memorial Trust on the edge of the airfield site, south of the Wansford road. The memorial was built to a design by Bill Sharpe who grew up in King’s Cliffe through the war and has vivid memories of the airfield. The memorial was unveiled by the Duke of Gloucester at a dedication ceremony on 25th August 1983 – a grand village occasion which brought many USAAF and other veterans back to King’s Cliffe.
At the end of the war, King’s Cliffe celebrated not on VE Day but on VJ Day – 15th August 1945 – when street parties for the children were held in several parts of the village. This photograph was taken at the centre of the village, on the corner opposite the Cross Keys Inn, where one of the street parties took place. Others were held in Park Street and on Back Way (Wood Road).

Among those photographed at the street parties that day were (left) Mrs Frances Maslin aged 97, the oldest King’s Cliffe resident at the time, sitting with baby Sam Fenn on her lap. He was the youngest resident, at just five months old.

[As a happy footnote to this photo, Sam’s mother, Kath Fenn, celebrated her 100th birthday in November last year (2019).]
By November 1939 thousands of young women from towns and cities, as well as from the countryside, had volunteered to work on the land. There was a severe shortage of men, as most had either left agriculture because of the low wages or had enlisted in the army. It was vital to produce more crops at home because the German U-boat campaign was preventing food supplies from overseas from reaching our shores.

The government decided to re-form the Women’s Land Army (first set up in the First World War). The women wore a uniform of green jumpers, brown trousers and brown felt hats and they performed many jobs around the farms such as milking, ploughing and bringing in the harvest. They helped to keep Britain supplied with food during the whole of the war.

Forty Land Girls were billeted at Brampton House in Chapel Brampton and worked on farms in Spratton and the surrounding area. A number of them enjoyed life in Northamptonshire so much that they stayed on after the war and married local young men. Evelyn Eggleton from London married Thomas Manning of Spratton and Ursula Wood married Lewis Dickens, also from Spratton.

Land Army girls billeted at Brampton House in Chapel Brampton worked on the farms in Spratton during the Second World War. Margaret Richardson, Dorothy Wakefield and Evelyn Eggleton were part of a pruning group, sent round to a number of farms to prune trees in the orchards.

By Enid Jarvis, Spratton Local History Society, April 2020
I have treasured and detailed records of a beautiful 19 year old, my mum, Marie Chapman, a Soprano who sang at the first troop concert given in Northampton and subsequently assisted every week of the war, singing to the Y. M. C. A.

Marie sang for various concert parties including “The New Moon” before forming her own concert party, “The Regionnaires”, singing to troops in hospitals and camps. In my mother’s scrapbook there is this pencilled note dated September 1939 - a request from a soldier in the audience “Will Marie please sing “My Hero” from The Chocolate Soldier?”

Marie sang before thousands of the troops of the Canadian Army arriving in England under its command. The County Cricket Ground was the scene for the presentation of Army Awards and as Miss Chapman entered the arena in a beautiful evening gown, in the days of austerity, there were deafening cheers of the Canadian troops.

Mum’s scrapbook is filled with precious memories . . .” serving and entertaining those newly called up at the outbreak of war, then the tired boys from Dunkirk, then the French, the Belgians . . . then later the R.A.F . . . the Yanks . . . and always the British Tommy. We, in a small way watched history over the Y.M.C.A counter. I shall never forget the grateful thanks of the “Boys”.”
Regimental Sergeant Major
George A. Jelley MBE
(2nd October 1898 - 4th October 1986)
By Debra Cox, Public Programme Manager, Northampton Museums & Art Gallery

Service: The Northamptonshire Yeomanry
and the 1st Northamptonshire Yeomanry

George A. Jelley served with the Northamptonshire Yeomanry from 1920 until 1967. In the Second World War, George served as Regimental Sergeant Major of the 1st Northamptonshire Yeomanry.

He was involved in a number of actions such as ‘Operation Overlord’ in the Normandy campaign, the conflict in Holland in 1944, and the Rhine Crossings campaign to push the German Army across the Rhine in Belgium and Holland in 1945.

In 1957 he was granted an MBE for his services.

Image Courtesy of the Northamptonshire Yeomanry Association Benevolent Fund
Rex Cousins

By Denise Horn, Nenescape

My stepfather Rex Cousins who grew up in Earls Barton.

His father was a bus driver, Rex accompanied him on trip to Coventry and was so appalled by what he saw of the remains of the Cathedral he vowed to take revenge. As soon as he was old enough he joined the RAF, became a “Tail End Charlie” in a Lancaster.

Before he died I arranged a trip for him to Coningsby. I thought just he would be able to board the Lanc but the whole family were invited on board. I understood why, such a tiny space, to be flying with hundreds of other planes, no lights, possibly about to meet the enemy, knowing how many had been slaughtered before you. It was humbling and important for us to get a smidgen of insight to what people had gone through. Despite chronic arthritis Rex, in his 80s climbed into the rear turret, it was extremely emotional.

After the war, he and his family bought a house in Grafton Street, Northampton. He later set up Cousins Engineering (still going in Bunting Road) with his partner Ken Gibbs.
The small village of Teeton, near to Hollowell, Northamptonshire, celebrated the end of the war in Europe with a fancy dress parade for the children followed by a tea party in the Church Hall. In the evening there was a bonfire for everyone on the village green. Carol Wallbank, a small child at the time, remembers it still.

The photograph shows probably the whole of the village in May 1945 standing outside the gates of the Grade II listed Teeton Hall after the fancy dress parade. The children can be seen in the front row in their costumes.
Robert William Frederick Hadnett MM (1908-1996) came to Spratton in the 1950s from the Knowle area of the West Midlands. He was always known as ‘British Bob’ because he raced and repaired only British motorcycles.

He was in the Royal Corps of Signals in the Second World War and was awarded the Military Medal, the Croix de Guerre and the Albert Medal (Belgium) for services at Dunkirk.

He was a member of the Royal British Legion and, together with his wife, Florence (1907-1997) he organised the Poppy Appeal in Spratton each November from the 1950s until 1991. Bob and Florence Hadnett’s ashes lie in the churchyard of St Andrew’s.

8th May 1995 –
50th Anniversary of VE Day

Bob Balderson, who served in the Middle East and Greece in the Royal Army Service Corps: Jack Attwood, who served in the Far East in the Royal Marines; and Tom Smith, who served in North Africa, Sicily and Italy with the 5th Battalion Northamptonshire Regiment
The 75th Anniversary of VE Day
8th May 2020

A Virtual Commemoration