



North Benfleet at War – A Glimpse of the Past



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North Benfleet Village: Life and times 1936 – 1945

During the 1930's we lived in Pound Lane directly opposite Hall Road, North Benfleet. It may perhaps be best described as a small hamlet sandwiched between Wickford and Basildon with only two tiny shops in the immediate area; One being Mrs Crick's village post office – cum grocery store (Burnt Mills Rd) and Mr and Mrs Stoneley's small shop situated in Cranfield Park Road directly opposite the Harrow Inn. To obtain the main weekly grocery shopping there were only two options, either to Pitsea Market (Saturday) or Wickford Market (Wednesday) using Campbell's bus.



(Original Harrow Inn in Harrow Road-burnt down in July 1914)

My sister and I always accompanied our mother to Pitsea Market each Saturday to carry the shopping; it also enabled us to buy used comics for a ha'penny each... 'Beano', 'Dandy', 'Eagle', 'Hotspur' to name but a few.

Few of the locals owned cars those days; bicycles were quite common although many people walked to the bus stop at 'Pump Corner' to connect with trains at either Pitsea or Wickford.



Pump Corner

Those needing to catch the early morning 06.00 L. M. S train to London, or places in between, caught the only buses available at the top of Pound Lane, a mile walk from our home. In my father's case for instance and because he worked in London, he left home at 05.40 each morning, first by bicycle to Pitsea Rail Station thence to Fenchurch St by L.M.S train returning home at around 6-30 in the evening. (No fun in winter!)

Like most men those days he worked Saturday morning and did not return home until about 3.00pm. There were no buses operating in Pound Lane those days. Bread was delivered by horse and cart (as were milk deliveries) and the nearest butcher was Mr Mann located at the top of Pound Lane near London Road. Living conditions were primitive, especially prior to WW2 when we first moved into North Benfleet with coal gas used for lighting and cooking. Main sewerage was not provided to the local area until about 1936/7. Southend-on-Sea represented our annual day's holiday and in those days was the Mecca for a large percentage of day trippers from London.

This perhaps gives a small insight into the life and times of North Benfleet as I knew it from 1936 until 1944 when we departed for South Devon.

1939 War Was Declared

Even as an almost ten-year-old boy and indelibly imprinted in my mind, I vividly recall sitting with our family listening to the battery powered radio on the day that war was declared. It was 11.15 a.m. on 3rd September 1939. We could only afford to listen to the wireless once or twice a week (the main battery cost 11/6d) and lasted barely two months before replacement. The additional wet cell battery known as an 'Accumulator' needed recharging weekly and costing sixpence to do so; Battery powered radios were not cheap to run those days.

The morning when war was declared found the atmosphere within our very small sitting cum dining area as absolutely 'electrifying'. None of the five children were allowed to speak until Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain had finished broadcasting the ensuing silence was overpowering and somewhat daunting.

Eventually normal conversation resumed, albeit quite excitable; our parents telling us about their experiences of WW1, the horror of so many lives lost, rationing, their memories of bombing by Zeppelins (on two occasions in London) and leaving us children with distinct feelings of dread and left us wondering just what lay ahead.

Phoney War Period

Regrettably I cannot give exact dates of events following war being declared. It all happened over 75 years ago and I therefore cannot be totally confident that the dates I have given are totally correct. PW

It did not seem long before rationing was imposed. I remember that 'Tate and Lyle' decided to retail small blue half pound packets of sugar simply because that was the weekly amount of sugar allowed for one person. Butter and margarine consisted of only a few ounces per week. Sweets also were rationed and apportioned by providing everyone a card using a points system. Meat also was severely rationed. Slowly but surely, we all realized that things generally were getting really serious. Fortunately, we had a very large garden with about eighty fruit trees and grew most of our own vegetables. We kept chickens for our eggs, and those, plus rabbits were an excellent meat supplement. I recall 'Dried eggs' coming on the

market 'Spam' and bread purchased using the 'Points' system and the never to be forgotten 'Lord Woolton Pie' ... (Nothing but vegetables).

We had a corrugated iron 'Anderson Air Raid Shelter' delivered to our home and had to dig, what appeared to my young mind, a huge hole in which to erect it and then place the soil on top. My Dad later built wooden bunks within it in which we were able to sleep. We were ready!



(Typical air raid shelter – Haven, Essex Wild Life site, Dunton)

The war proper seemed to have been delayed for quite some time although obviously this was the period when all sorts of preparations for war were taking place. At school we all helped with applying gummed paper tape to the windows in Criss cross fashion in case of bomb blast. Contractors arrived to build a large brick school air raid shelter. Gas masks were supplied (we were required to carry them at all times) with a requisite cardboard carrying case. Babies needed to have a special gas mask requiring them to be almost totally enclosed within it. We had a corrugated iron 'Anderson Air Raid Shelter' delivered to our home and had to dig, what appeared to my young mind, a huge hole in which to erect it and then place the soil on top. My Dad later built wooden bunks within it in which we were able to sleep. We were ready!

That same period saw the formation of the 'Home Guard', (ARP Wardens) and Special Police Officers. My Father said he was required (we later found this was untrue) to join the Home Guard, (the headquarters being conveniently located in the (vacant) 'Victor Cafe' opposite the Harrow Inn (Corner of Southend Arterial/Cranfield Park Roads).

Along with other eligible men my father attended drill parades Sunday mornings (causing the family much amusement) the appointed officer in charge was the local 'Gentleman Farmer' in Hall Road, Mr Jackson, who immediately adopted the title of '**Captain** Jackson' with appropriate uniform and appointing his oldest farm labourer as 'Sergeant'; A man who had no military experience whatsoever and often needed to leave the 'parade ground' to milk the cows!

Initially, and possibly because of his own WW1 experiences, my father disliked what he called as being "Called Up" again although this attitude soon changed and he relished

attending Home Guard parades especially with headquarters being located so near to the pub. (Now we know the truth) and also as to why he also voluntarily attended the Victoria Cafe at nights on "Fire Watch" duties, replete with 'Stirrup Pump and bucket of sand...If truth be known these fellows were all sitting around the fire drinking beer and playing darts... Insisting it was all part of 'Fire Watching'!

I well recall watching Home Guardsmen, of all sorts, ages, and sizes performing military drills on Sunday mornings, all in civilian clothing. They were provided with broomsticks instead of firearms, and being shouted out by a buffoon of a 'Sergeant'. We young lads found it all highly amusing to watch, but because of our incessant guffaws were soon told to "Clear Off" in no uncertain terms. Even more amusing was to hear the Sergeant give the order to 'Dismiss' and to see the 'Squaddies' immediately 'streaking' across the road to the Harrows Inn. ... 'Dad's Army' TV programme could only have been modelled on events such as this...

Anti-Invasion Defences

Slowly but surely various forms of Anti Invasion Defences were in evidence. For months a drag-line excavator could be seen from dawn to dusk excavating 50 feet wide by 15 feet deep channel, with a 45-degree slope facing East towards the coast and vertical on the opposite side. The theory being that tanks would come from the Coast, enter the 'Tank Trap' but be unable to climb the opposite (vertical) side. The tank traps extended (as I recall) from Sadler's Farm for miles across the fields in a North by West direction (approx. 348 deg) down towards what we knew as the 'Roman Road'.... passing the end of Clifton Road, thence to the rear of Jacksons farm (Hall Road) angling down almost immediately alongside the old Salvation Army Hall in Old Harrow Road, across the Arterial Road, and on towards Wickford. I have detailed the precise location on the attached map.

Many of the local children learned to swim in those tank traps. They were always full of water and after the children had been in them for hours and stirring up the clay, they all came out looking like Asians.... None of them possessed towels and one only needs to imagine the colour of their bed sheets as a result.

Wherever the tank traps intersected the roads i.e., Old Harrow Road and what we then knew as the Southend Arterial Road (A127), huge cubic solid concrete blocks, (12ft square) were positioned each edge of the road. Each of these concrete blocks had, about 4ft from the base, a six-inch drainpipe inserted through them, thus to allow a very thick steel hawser that could be rapidly stretched across the road in the event of invasion. Unknown by most, and beneath those two roads, a three-inch diameter drain pipe was laid about a foot under the surface containing a form of corded guncotton within it. At each side of the road were small wooden boxes (reasonably well hidden – but not from inquisitive boys) in which were located the ends of the corded guncotton. All that was needed in the case of invasion was for the boxes to be opened and detonators attached to the guncotton. The road could then be blown up thus slowing invading troops or any form of mechanised devices.

In the very large fields directly next to, and adjacent to Clifton Road, (opposite what used to be called Smilers Farm) were erected 25 feet high steel scaffolding poles in the shape of 'A' frames. They stood about 30 feet high, about 30 yards apart and strung between the apexes of the 'A' frames was a steel cable. They resembled the high wires used by gymnasts and became a real nuisance to farmers especially when cutting corn/wheat). They were designed to (hopefully) stop German gliders landing, or at the very least seriously damage them. (As happened at Arnhem).

Pillboxes were placed in various locations. I have supplied a map showing the precise location of many of those pillboxes and [in another of my articles](#) described how a friend and I actually gained entry to a large Blockhouse (Situating on the Eastern side of Pound Lane and about 100 yards prior to the intersection of A127 which we knew as the 'Arterial Road'). We never knew it to be an arms magazine until after we had stolen a box which had large arrows painted on it. We later discovered it to be full of hand grenades. Realizing, with a degree of horror what we had in our possession we then threw the box and contents into the tank traps. We never heard anything more about it.

World War II Decoys

I have written at some length [in an article on this website](#) on World War II Decoys. This is a most interesting article especially as one such device was built in a field directly opposite our home and barely 300 yards distant. There was another situated in the "Wick" and another at South Benfleet.

Since writing my article others have submitted their own thoughts about these 'Decoys'. Noticeably there has never been any authoritative explanation given by those within Government Departments concerned as to the true intention of these devices. 'Res ipsa loquitor'!

School

Our local school was named North Benfleet Church of England Primary School and situated in 'School Lane' off old Harrows Road. I attended it from 1935-1941. I seem to think the Headmistress, Miss Fuller, didn't like me too much. I admit that I was mischievous, an occasional truant, often in trouble for fighting and once cautioned by the local policeman because I was seen by the postman to be pointing my Dad's Home Guard .303 rifle out of our roadside window. He didn't know it but I often tracked him laboriously pedalling his bike up Hall Road Hill imagining him to be a German soldier... I actually inserted the five-shot magazine into the rifle on one occasion....



North Benfleet School C 1950

In her end of term reports about me (I still have them somewhere), Miss Fuller always seemed to summarize by saying..." A boy with good potential and good on the **Hole!**"... I seem to think her own spelling was not too good and that she actually meant "Whole"!

Soon after war was declared the authorities decided it was too dangerous for children to walk to school on their own because of incessant air raids. We therefore had to wait for Miss Fuller to walk from the top of Pound Lane (a mile away) and as she passed each house a pupil would join what was called the 'Crocodile' until we reached school. On one occasion we all had to dive into a ditch for cover because of strafing by a Heinkel He 111 bomber – He flew above at such low altitude that we could clearly see the air gunner at the front of the aircraft looking down at us... (I have attached a photo of the identical kind of aircraft). We later learned in the 'Southend Standard' that the already damaged aircraft was shot down and crashed into a Southend children's school killing several children.

At the height of the air raids, often many of them in one day, we spent hours in the darkened brick school shelter seated on wooden forms. Because I was familiar with getting our family wireless wet cell battery charged every week or so, I was appointed the "Light monitor" simply because I knew how to turn it ON or OFF! I quite enjoyed being in charge of the 6-volt light.... I was quite enamoured by a young girl at the time; she sat next to me in the shelter and when I chose to save battery power, I'd simply turn off the 6v bulb and we'd have a rather pleasant cuddle and kiss... (War wasn't all that bad at times...)

When aircraft were engaged in battle, and it was safe to do so, we often stood outside the school shelter and watched Spitfires/Hurricanes dog fighting. On one horrific occasion we actually saw a German aircraft machine gunning a Spitfire pilot descending by parachute. It was absolutely sickening to watch. The British parachutist looked as though he came down near Rayleigh.

Police often came to the school to give advice. Clearly the war was at a stage when even children could/would be at personal risk by the enemy. We were repeatedly warned not to pick up strange objects. Not to touch strange objects hanging from trees. Not to touch, pick up Fountain Pens, Wallets or anything unusual. Then...in 1943, more Police School visits when they brought with them large notices warning us of 'Butterfly Bombs' and even brought with them one of these shocking devices that had been deactivated. It seems that very large numbers of people of all ages had been killed in Grimsby and Cleethorpes with these fiendish devices.

Battle of Britain

At the beginning of **July 1940**, the war in the air had started in earnest. It was actually to become known as the "Battle of Britain" although one wonders if it should not have been better known as the "Battle for Britain". Almost daily, we witnessed our brave pilots entering into 'Dogfights' with the Germans. Looking back these days it seems almost like a dream to have seen such events. At times it was exciting to watch, at others total despair when any of our own pilots were shot down. One occasion I clearly remember was when the pilot of an aircraft having bailed out of his aircraft at fairly low altitude finally landed in the small field behind our house! We all thought him to be a German until a soldier, bathed in sweat after running for miles in order to arrest the 'German' went over to him, with rifle cocked, only to discover that the 'German' was in fact Polish! We invited the soldier in for a cup of tea when he told us that if the pilot had been a German, he would have been entitled to seven days leave immediately.

Air Raids and Bombing

Extract From BBC History (Quote)

"The Bombing Begins"

After a preliminary raid on 5th September the bombing started proper on the afternoon of the 7th. Almost 1,000 German Aircraft – over 300 bombers escorted by 600 fighters – crossed the Channel. It was the largest collection of aircraft ever seen. Fighter Command had not expected raids on London, but now attempted to intercept the waves of bombers. A huge fight developed over the Thames Estuary.

Considering the above I will never forget the afternoon of the 7th September 1940.

On that very same day my schoolboy friend and neighbour Stan Amos plus his brother Len and a few others were playing at the top of Hall Road hill in the vicinity of Jacksons Farm. From that position we could easily see down to the bottom of the hill and see our homes very easily. We were only about 400 yards distant.

Fortunately for us a large army Blockhouse was located near where we were playing. The aircraft siren sounded and simultaneously we could both hear and see an enormous number of enemy aircraft approaching at quite low altitude. The Home Guardsman guarding the Blockhouse called out to us and told us to get inside as we had no time to get home safely. Fortunately, we were near enough to home to shout and wave to our anxious parents who could see us and knew we were safe.

To see and hear so many bombers in blocks of 20, (we counted well over 300) is absolutely indescribable. An eerie feeling pervaded the whole atmosphere; all that we could hear was the awful droning noise from the bombers, leaving us absolutely terrified and in fear of our lives.

As it happened, we need not have worried as the bombers were on their way to London – 25 miles away as the crow flies and 10 minutes by air. ***We were not to know at that time however that this represented the beginning of the actual Blitz and that the country was about to suffer 76 days of bombing.***

According to official Government records the actual blitz commenced on 7th September 1940.

By that date of course we were quite used to sleeping in our air raid shelter and although it had earlier flooded with water and the Council having concreted the lower part of it we were much more comfortable in it albeit always quite damp. As earlier mentioned, my father had built bunks so as to accommodate all seven of the family and although dreadfully cramped it at least afforded us a greater feeling of security when the air raids were at their peak. Only those that have experienced bombing will know just how much the earth really shakes after bombs explode, most especially the high explosive kind and especially in clay which represents much of the geological basis of the area in which we lived.

The incessant air raids at that part of the war left us all extremely tired and eventually reached a stage where we did not have to start school until 10am. I forget just how long that lasted.

I have recorded on my map exactly where bombs were dropped near to our home Viz – Two H.E bombs fell next to Mr Pratt's farmhouse in Pound Lane (where a large Medical Facility now exists and right above the huge craters). A land mine in Old Harrow Road near the intersection of School Road. Two H.E.bombs in the field at the top of Clifton Road also leaving massive craters. Plus, many, more in the region.

A number of German aircraft crashed in the district. One that I can distinctly recall crashed in the field about 500 yards beyond the top of Clifton Road. Another near the Pound Lane,

London Road intersection, and another (I believe it was a Spitfire) up toward the top of Pound Lane near, I believe, Westlake Farm. These crashes all occurred during the Battle of Britain.

Towards the end of the worst part of the bombing and when we were in the shelter one night my eldest sister (Joan) needed to go indoors for one reason or another. she had just witnessed what she thought was a small plane crashing not far from the house. "Making a strange noise like a motorbike, flying terribly low and huge flames coming out the back". It was, of course, the first night of the V1s which were later to become known as "Doodle Bugs".

Towards the end of the worst part of the bombing and when we were in the shelter one night my eldest sister (Joan) needed to go indoors for one reason or another. She had only gone for a few minutes when she returned and literally threw herself back into the shelter saying she had just witnessed what she thought was a small plane crashing not far from the house. "Making a strange noise like a motorbike, flying terribly low and huge flames coming out the back". It was, of course, the first night of the V1s which were later to become known as "Doodle Bugs". At that stage I think my parents had enough especially as my sister was expecting a baby and our house was declared by the Council to be unsafe.

We finally moved to Dartmouth in South Devon shortly after D-day 1944. That, of course is the beginning of another story...

In conclusion, one of my greatest regrets was when we moved to Devon, I was obliged to leave behind all my war souvenirs. There were just too many of them and far too heavy. All told they would have weighed more than a hundredweight. There was no way it could all be carried on the train.

I had literally hundreds of pieces of shell and bomb shrapnel, a complete Incendiary Bomb (defused by a fireman), the whole windscreen from a Messerschmitt aircraft, Radio aerial from a Spitfire, and most of the parachute from a landmine that had originally landed in Old Harrow Road, and nose of anti-aircraft shell complete with timing device.

My final 'piece de resistance'.... I found the port tailplane of a German Heinkel 111.

During the Battle of Britain, we saw a German aircraft shot down and part of the tailplane fluttering down near Jacksons Farm. An extensive search failed to recover it. A long time afterwards, Stanley Amos and I were fishing in one of the two ponds at the farm, (the subject pond, with its own little island now filled in) when we discovered the marked tailplane almost covered under dead leaves... We took it down to my home and it, plus all of my 'Souvenirs' were still there when we left...

The souvenirs I collected are mute testimony to the years of enemy action that all in North Benfleet experienced during those awful times hence the name I have accorded to this story.



By Peter Watts
Australia
March 2015

Peter has written other articles concerning his North Benfleet experiences and you can review them on the Benfleet Community Archive Site. www.benfleethistory.org.uk

Ken Porter
Basildon Borough heritage Society
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