

A schoolboy's memories of wartime Alvingham

by Philip Shucksmith

The first indication of the preparation for war was the issuing of gas masks to all civilians in early 1939. It was expected that if war with Germany commenced, we would be subjected to an aerial assault because of the superiority of the German air force. Preparations had been made for this eventuality by way of Air Raid Precautions (A.R.P.); a Wardens post at The Stores was selected and two wardens, Percy Trafford (proprietor of Trafford's stores) and Tom Shucksmith (Philip's father) were appointed.

The early hours of September 2nd 1939 were shattered with the arrival of a searchlight team trying to gain access to the grass field at High Street House. Daylight revealed a generator and searchlight manned by Territorials of the Lincolnshire Regiment from Gainsborough. The generator had a large Lister engine which had to be cranked off by two men, starting it up in the middle of the night and making a fearful noise which in time I managed to ignore, even though it was just outside my bedroom window. The Lincolnshire Territorials were replaced by London Territorials in late 1939. They were mostly professional men who had been employed by the Milk Marketing Board, the BBC, and one was a professional singer. These were replaced in late 1949 by Sherwood Foresters, the site was enlarged to three searchlights and three machine guns, and the field by the Village Hall was covered by many wooden barracks serving as Troop H.Q. under the Battery H.Q. at Louth Park. With more than fifty soldiers stationed here, the ladies opened a canteen in the Methodist Schoolroom to provide some comfort for them and this was quite successful and well patronised. The soldiers remained until mid-1944 when all of them left, presumably to go to Europe. One local lady was widowed, having married one of the Sherwood Foresters. The camp was left unoccupied and there was no vandalism.

After the fall of France, enemy aircraft became regular visitors at night, attacking airfields at Grimsby and Hull. On the night of June 21st 1940, Poplar Farm was attacked; hundreds of incendiaries were dropped, setting the straw stacks on fire as explosive bombs were dropped within twenty yards of the buildings at Poplar, doing considerable damage to the house and buildings. Lone hit and run planes attacked occasionally, one was shot down at Cockerington and another bombed Louth Station, making his getaway very low over Alvingham, with the machine guns blazing away at him, the only time that they were fired in anger.

In late 1940 and during 1942, Manby was crowded out with airmen on training courses. This necessitated billeting some of them out of camp and The Grange, The Mill, and High Street House were selected as suitable billets. Eighteen airmen descended each night at sixpence per bed per night.

All of the males over seventeen in the village served in various ways. A fire-fighting team with a pump was based at Len Wright's premises, the rest served in the Home Guard, while the more elderly were organised into a fire-watching scheme. Len Wright was a carpenter living in the house next to White Barn Farm Yard (Yarburgh Road). The site was also a shop and petrol station. In the early 1970s, it became a pottery and ultimately, two houses were built on the site.

Many of the bombers were based in Lincolnshire; initially they were Hampdens, Whiteleys, and Wellingtons. From late 1942, the Lancasters increased in numbers and the evening sky was filled with them. Similarly, the American Flying Fortresses collected overhead in a morning, leaving vapour trails. In the afternoon, some of them struggled home with a stopped propeller and jagged holes in wings and fuselage.

At regular intervals, special efforts were organised to raise money for the war effort, such as 'War Weapons Week'; a Spitfire cost £5000 and a Lancaster £25,000.

The War was a disaster until October 1942; up to then, communiqués only mentioned "strategic withdrawals" and "withdrawals according to plan". The battle of El Alamein was celebrated by the ringing of church bells, hitherto only to be rung when enemy troops landed from the air. My geography improved during the War, many countries and cities being in the news. Many were scenes of disasters like Dieppe, Dunkirk, Crete, Tobruk, Singapore, Hong Kong, Burma; when our fortunes changed, we heard of Tripoli, Tunis, Stalingrad, Leningrad, Kursk, Naples, Rome, Normandy, Brussels and the Rhine, Dachau and Belson. We were spared the horrors of the doodlebug and the V2 rockets. VE Day was celebrated on June 8th 1946 in Alvingham with children's tea in the Methodist Schoolroom, followed by sports which had to be curtailed because of rain. The sports were concluded on the next Friday evening, much to the enjoyment of all. Fourteen residents who had left the village to serve in various capacities were presented with 4 pounds and 2 shillings each, together with a presentation card.

When the Army left, the barracks, which had been built on Sarah Shucksmith's land, were given by Sarah to the village to be used as a village hall. It was essentially an asbestos hut. Over the years, it was modernised by Walter Pickering (who used to work for the post office) around 1969. The ultimate transformation was initiated and overseen by Philip Davies who lived at the Alvingham water mill. He died shortly after completing the works. A painting hangs in the hall in remembrance to him. The words under his portrait state, "if you are looking for a monument, then look around you [in this village hall]." Such was the high esteem in which the villagers of Alvingham held Philip Davies for his commitment, skill and dedication.