

Looking back at Cowbridge in wartime

18.3.97

by JEFF ALDEN

MY last article in The GEM mentioned the LDVs manning the road blocks on the roads leading into town. They were erected near the railway bridge on the Cardiff Road; near the then Girls' High School on the Aberthin Road, and up at the Darren on the Bridgend side of town.

These road blocks were manned every night by a platoon of about six to eight men (including the schoolboy sergeants) and during an air raid warning, all vehicles and pedestrians were stopped – and identity cards had to be produced.

In the blackout, it was quite a risky business stopping vehicles, especially on the

Cardiff Road, as the vehicles were coming downhill with very limited lights (remember those headlamp covers with thin horizontal slits in the metal – and the blue paint on other lamps?) – and all the guard could do was swing a hurricane lamp!

The barricades were constructed of all sorts of material and the one on the Aberthin Road included an old horse-drawn stagecoach, in which the guards often took shelter in wet weather. Soon, more solid obstructions took their place – large concrete blocks, four-feet square, were placed to act as anti-tank devices, with a colliery dram filled with concrete, ready to be rolled into place to block the road.

Once, when a bus full of Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders was coming in from

Pontyclun, it clipped the end of the dram on which two curious schoolboys were standing, knocking them over and injuring them badly. At least the medical response was immediate, as the Scottish MO was on the bus.

Mention of this regiment points to the fact that Cowbridge saw very many different groups of military men during the war. Danny Powell remembers Belgian troops, with the soup wagon behind the town hall – and he, as a youngster, feeding on rice that they gave out! Presents were more generous from the Americans, who had a temporary camp on Stalling Down; David Davies remembers being fascinated by the large number of black faces! Soldiers 'dug in' in slit trenches opposite the High School – and were no doubt mesmerised by the sight of the High School girls, with their tunics tucked into their knickers, being exhorted by the headmistress to "look like daffodils" on those very same slopes!

There were also temporary camps in one of the Stumpy fields, where Borough Close is now, and some soldiers were billeted in the dance hall of the cinema.

Cowbridge was accustomed to airmen, of course – RAF St Athan opened in 1938 and RAF Llandow in about 1940. My father was stationed at Llandow for a time and he – like many others – was billeted in the town; staying first with Mrs Willis in Westgate and then with John and Gwyneth Roberts in the School House on Broadway. Thus began my acquaintance with Cowbridge.

Mrs Frederick has told me how, when her grandmother was living in The Limes, officers' wives would come and have tea in her front room – the only place where they could have some privacy with their husbands!

Many thanks to Diana Bird and Alan Thomas for their reminiscences – more to follow!

LOOKING BACK AT COWBRIDGE IN WARTIME

by JEFF ALDEN

I RECEIVED a letter from Alf Charles of Cowbridge, in response to my recent GEM articles – and I thought it so interesting, that I will quote it verbatim:

YOUR recent articles in The GEM bring memories crowding back to me. I remember well most of the incidents which have already been mentioned, such as the troops in town; the field cookhouse between the gym and dining hall; the relaxation of the rule that plimsolls be worn in the dining hall, as the soldiers' boots soon put paid to the high polish in the one-year-old dining hall.

One of my earliest memories is seeing the LDV drilling near the cattle market, with LDV armbands and no weapons. They were later to become the Home Guard.

The troops, in 1939, would be marching up and down the High Street, singing such songs as *Roll Out The Barrel* and *We Are Going To Hang Out The Washing On The Siegfried Line*. I well remember watching this going on from my form room upstairs in the Old Hall and being 'brought back' to the lesson by the loud voice of Mr Tudor Hughes, the Welsh teacher (I even remember that we were translating *Pinocchio* at the time).

Then came the morning when Emma, as the local train was known, unloaded us boys and girls and left the station to allow a troop train – which was 'parked' under the two railway bridges over the Aberthin and Cardiff roads – to pull in. The troops were lined up along the station approach and down Eastgate Street, past the present sorting office.

One evening early in the war, a small

group of people from Maendy and Ystradowen came to the Pavilion Cinema. As we were leaving the cinema, the air raid warning sounded and all traffic came to a standstill (as was required in the early days) and put out their lights until the All Clear sounded. Hence, there was no bus to return home and we had to walk home (in the black-out, of course).

As we approached the road-block near the Girls' High School, came the command, "Halt – who goes there?". One lady, thinking she recognised the voice, replied: "It's me, you silly fool." However, we were allowed to pass and walked the rest of the way.

During June 1942, I sat my CWB examination (equivalent of today's GCSEs) and I remember Mr J D Owen telling us during the lunchtime that those who did not have an exam during the afternoon should go home as quickly as possible and get some sleep before the air raids started again during the night.

At that time, our sleep was constantly disturbed by the 'throbbing' engines of the Luftwaffe and the anti-aircraft guns around Cardiff.

I think the Vale must have been under a regular route for the Luftwaffe on the way to Swansea, Cardiff and, possibly, Liverpool and Coventry. There was always the fear that one would be the victim of a 'drop your bombs and run' incident.

These are just a few memories; there were also the evacuees, the gas masks, the ration books, the registration for pre-military service at the age of 16, the Churchill speeches, all of which made life quite hectic.

Thanks, Alf – other comments would be most welcome!

22/4/97

by JEFF ALDEN

MANY young men from Cowbridge and district went away to war, some never to return. The long list of names on the War Memorial and on the Grammar School memorial tablet in the church pay witness to those who died; for their families there was great pain and anguish - and for the families of those who did eventually return there was also a lot of worry and concern.

Even in Cowbridge itself, the war seemed terribly close. During the great air raids over Swansea, there were three nights of constant air-raid warnings, with so many aircraft passing overhead that the roofs of the air-raid shelters vibrated and rattled without stopping. On another occasion, an anti-aircraft gun was being towed through Aberthin when the siren sounded; it pulled into the yard in front of the Farmers Arms and fired at a plane going overhead.

The tremendous noise of the gun did what the siren had failed to do - make the families of Aberthin jump up out of their beds in alarm and into their shelters! Perhaps this was the one gun that the Royal Artillery had positioned in a field near Ty'n y Caeau Farm. That must have been in place for only part of the war, however, for on one occasion, David Davies remembers seeing a German plane flying the length of the High Street on a beautiful moonlight night, on its way to Llandow - and that precipitated a local furore as there had been no ack-ack fire at all.

Bombs dropped from time to time; on one occasion the goods yard of Cowbridge railway station - probably only a minor target, luckily - was missed and the bombs dropped in the field near the swimming pool.

Bryn Morgan remembers arriving at school at Maendy and seeing Mr Owen Phillips and some pupils looking out into the fields below the school, where a string of bombs had landed; a cow in Mount Pleasant Farm was the sole, unfortunate casualty.

An incendiary bomb landed just off the Aberthin Road, opposite the present entrance to the comprehensive school. Up on Stalling Down, near the clump of trees, for many years there remained a crater where another bomb had exploded; but certainly the luckiest escape was at St Mary Church, where a direct hit was scored on a farmhouse - but the bomb did not explode!

Unfortunately, though not surprisingly, with the number of RAF stations in the vicinity, there were losses of planes. In July 1942, two Spitfires, with Royal New Zealand Air Force pilots, collided in mid-air over Welsh St Donats, with one plane crashing to the south-east near Maerdy Farm and the other in a field near Caercady House.

Bryn used to pass this way to his grandmother's every week, and went to see the hole which the plane had made when it came down. It had broken the iron railings at the side of the road running from Watery Lane to Caercady.

In January 1943, on a very dark and stormy afternoon, with thunder and lightning - rumour had it that the plane had been struck by lightning - another Spitfire, this time piloted by an Australian - came down over Llantrithyd. Another Spitfire crashed near Llandough; the wreckage guarded by the Home Guard until it was examined and cleared away. There was certainly enough activity in the area to remind people that the war was on!

8/4/99

May 27th 1000

Looking back at wartime in Cowbridge

by JEFF ALDEN

WARTIME brought a degree of privation to the people of Cowbridge; rationing meant the need for 'points' for food, clothing coupons and petrol coupons and 'utility' furniture. There were certainly food shortages - but some, at least, found ways around the difficulties. A number of people have told me of how important rabbits became in the wartime diet - at 6d each, they were a cheap and nourishing source of meat!

Rather more enterprisingly, some people tried to keep animals without registering them - I heard of one family who kept a couple of pigs in a dilapidated building in Eastgate, hoping to be self-sufficient in pork and bacon. The discovery of these animals by a member of the local constabulary seemed to spell disaster to this attempt at private enterprise - but the promise of regular supplies whenever slaughtering occurred helped to keep the policeman quiet - and happy, as apparently the arrangement was insisted upon until the end of the war!

Even today, when the words 'black market' are uttered, people become quiet, smile enigmatically and say "well, we managed, somehow". Certainly, the shopkeepers' allowances for breakages in bars of chocolate and sweets meant that there was sometimes a little extra kept available for that special occasion. As far as the shopkeepers were concerned, the counting up of coupons and delivering them to the office in Woodstock House meant a lot of extra work.

Other attempts to become more self-sufficient in food included the 'Dig for Victory' campaign with an emphasis on vegetable production in gardens and allotments. Stalling Down was ploughed up (as had also occurred in the First World War) - the grassy area on the top, which was ploughed, still provides a clear contrast with the bracken-covered area, which was not touched.

I mentioned in an earlier article that Cowbridge welcomed many evacuees - the officially organised movement was from Kent, particularly from Chatham and Maidstone - but there were also family members brought in from Swansea and Cardiff because of the dangers of bombing.

One special group was the contingent of Jewish refugee children who were brought to Llandough Castle a few months before the beginning of the war. They were part of the Kindertransport, the rescue operation that saved 10,000 children - from Czechoslovakia, Poland, Austria and Germany. Sir Sidney and Lady Byass made the castle available to the organisation.

"It had electricity, running water, and heat - it was like heaven" said one of those children when, 50 years later, many of them returned on a journey of remembrance and were pleased to meet some of their old playmates from Llandough! They remembered a larger castle - and rightly too, because after the war the central part of the building was demolished; the stones being used in the rebuilding of the City Inn! They had enjoyed playing in the tower, on the steps leading up to the turret - and once they used a load of stones to print the word 'Shalom' on the lawn. After all the years, they had very happy memories of their time in the Vale.

LOOKING BACK AT WARTIME IN COWBRIDGE ... *by JEFF ALDEN*

MANY thanks to those who responded to my appeal for information on Cowbridge during the last war. There is too much for one article, so this one deals with the effect of the early stages of war on the Grammar School - with particular thanks to Alan Thomas and David Davies.

The autumn school term started after the declaration of war on September 3, so the boys and staff returned to find a contingent of the 1st/5th Welch regiment stationed in the school. The headmaster was startled to be stopped outside the gym with a cry of "Halt! Who goes there?" - and the sight of a bayonet being waved nervously about two inches from his body by a newly-enlisted recruit.

The delicate maple floor of the new gym, which had been very carefully treated for a year, was soon pitted with the studs of army boots, and the dining room was also used as the army canteen, its window sills soon

charred with cigarette butts.

Troops were drilled just outside the school - which caused the boarders to wake up earlier than ever before. Having been softened up by the bugle calls for Reveille, their ears were then assailed by the bellowing of the sergeant in the 6am drill session! The Army moved on to more spacious premises in St Donats Castle in a few months, but other disturbances were longer lasting.

The school, particularly the boarding house, was blacked out with wooden frames faced with cardboard, made in the Woodwork Room, and with blue paint. A blast wall was built in front of the classrooms in Old Hall. The appeal to 'Dig for Victory' meant that the garden area between the gym and the dining hall (now hard-surfaced) was dug up (usually in woodwork lessons) and planted with potatoes and cabbage, to be used in school dinners. Because of petrol rationing and a reduction in bus services, school had to end at 3.55pm and - more importantly for the boys - no-one could be 'kept in' after school as a result!

293 Squad was the school's own

ATC squadron, aircraft recognition and shooting being especially popular skills. The .22 range was in the roof of Old Hall, while the boys used a range in Llandough for .33 and for Sten guns (!)

Sport was also affected - the presence of light tanks, Bren guns, and the voice of the RSM in the Bear Field, which was the usual 'home' pitch, compelled the rugby team to move to the Athletic Club grounds. A few extra games - of rugby and cricket - were played with Army teams and with RAF St Athan.

Some evacuees - from the Medway towns of Chatham, Rochester and Gillingham - joined the school, but as the 'call up' got under way, all but three of the original staff left to be replaced by temporary teachers.

Senior boys and some staff in the early days became members of the Local Defence Volunteers, the forerunner of the Home Guard. When an air raid warning went, all the pupils were supposed to take cover in shelters - rooms which had been reinforced with timber, like the cloakroom in Old Hall. The LDVs reported to the Town Hall armoury to collect rifles and ammunition, and then man the road blocks on the roads into town - but that's another story!

"Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding."

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