

The second world war 1939 to 1945

Your country needs you, again

More men joined up when war broke out again in 1939. They were sent off to various regiments, assessed for their fitness and ability and trained for a suitable role.

Most went on to fight in Europe, but some went to North Africa, the Middle East or further afield. Some elected to join the air force or navy in the case of Jack Hillyard (pictured right) who would go on to become the colourful landlord of the Musgrave Arms for 33 years from 1954.

Army training took place at Pegsdon Hills and the far end of Barn Hole was turned into rifle range where the steep slopes safely absorbed bullets missing their target.



Others served at home

Men whose occupation, fitness or age stopped them fighting were expected to take on local duties. Over 40 of them joined the Home Guard (in the photograph) and met regularly at the school.



Their job was to defend the area should an invasion occur and men patrolled Pegsdon Hills in case enemy parachutists landed there. Others became ARP (Air Raid Precautions) wardens whose HQ was at the rear of the village hall. Their main task was enforcing the night-time blackout.

A local Fire Service was set up and a shed at the Crown housed the fire engine. Four men slept there each night ready to respond if a call came in.

Henlow plays it part

RAF Henlow expanded with engineers maintaining and repairing aircraft while other assembled Hurricanes from parts made in Canada. They came in wooden packing cases which were reused creatively to create a unique control tower. Metal mesh reinforced the three grass runways so they withstood all the extra use. Several Shillington women worked at the Camp packing parachutes.

Around the perimeter of the airfield, five concrete pillboxes were built to defend it if an invasion occurred. From these, troops would have fired on the advancing enemy.

Bombing begins

The war came close to home in 1940 when two small bombs landed in a field on the Barton side of Higham Gobion. On another occasion, the east end of St Margaret's church was damaged and repairs had to wait until the war was over.

Henlow was an important target for the enemy. In September 1940, eight high explosive bombs damaged two hangars at RAF Henlow. Another attack missed the airfield but destroyed some cottages in Station Rd.

The skies were lit up for miles around when bombs fell on another German target, the Vauxhall factory in Luton which was making tanks. They killed 59 people.

A doodlebug that landed near Pirton exploded loudly and broke the glass in many village windows. ARP wardens from Shillington rushed there but fortunately no one was hurt.



Pirton schoolboys Ken and Sam Burton were the first to reach the wreckage of the doodlebug.

Photo courtesy of North Hertfordshire Museum.

Crash!

Several aircraft came down in this area. In 1940, a German Luftwaffe Dornier 17 smashed into a field near Pegsdon killing the pilot.

The worst tragedy happened in 1943 airfield Halifax II collided with a chimney at Arlesey brickworks and all 8 of the crew died.

Another mishap occurred when a Miles Majesty that took off from Henlow got into trouble and ploughed into in a field west of Bury Rd.

Later in the war in 1944, a Lancaster bomber returning from a raid on Stuttgart crashed near Pegsdon.

Rationing begins

The country was very dependent on imported items and petrol was rationed soon after war began. Food shortages became apparent and sugar, meat, fats, bacon and cheese were rationed from 1941. Everyone was given a ration book containing coupons which they presented to shopkeepers when these items were purchased.

To maintain home food production, men working on farms were exempt from being called up. Prisoners of war helped on farms near the camps where they lived. It became increasingly common for women to work, taking on the jobs that men vacated. 'Land girls' were recruited from towns and cities. Although inexperienced, they quickly gained the skills and experience that young men had traditionally taken many years to acquire. Local women helped with seasonal work, picking potatoes and peas to supplement family incomes.

The photo shows Mabel Ingrey and Edna West peasing in the 1950's.



The rise of the machines

Horses were still the main source of power as the war began but this would soon change. In 1941, the American Lease-Lend scheme began to help farmers mechanise. Manor Farm at Higham Gobion run by brothers Albert and Ken Parrish was the biggest farm in the area and obtained two Fordson tractors and a crawler. An International tractor, a combine harvester and a grain dryer joined them later.

Combine harvesters became more common and there were three (pictured) in use at Rosehill Farm in the 1950s.

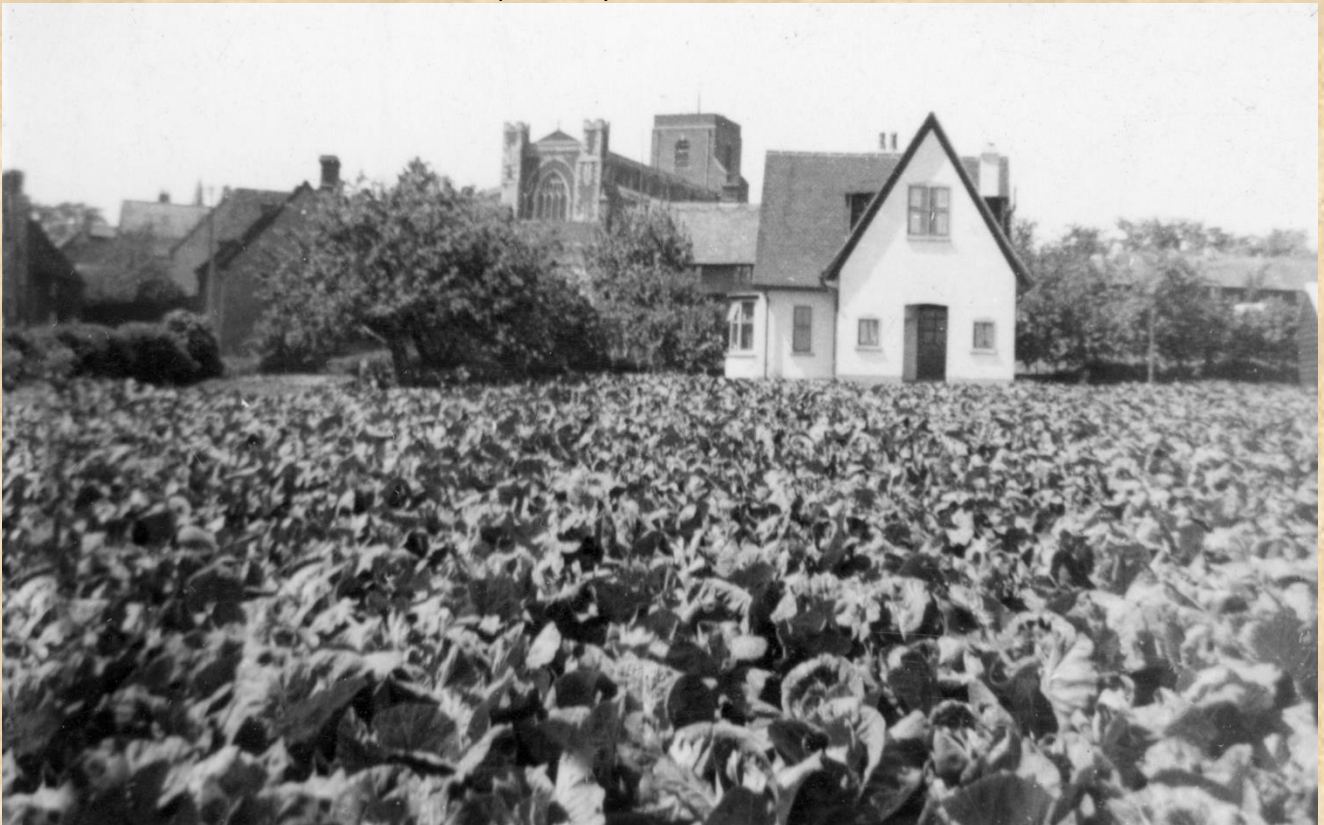


Land that had always been pasture and was rich in wild flowers was ploughed up for crops. Artificial fertilisers became available, increasing food production and averting hunger, but they also stimulated weed growth. Sulphuric acid was used as a crude but effective weedkiller in cereals but farm workers lacked sufficient protective clothing and splashes gave some burns.

Chemical companies developed new products to replace it and without the competition of weeds, crops yields improved dramatically. However, two of the herbicides, DDT and 2,4,5-T would later prove to be highly toxic and were eventually banned. Most farmers had become dependent on chemicals to maintain yields and other products came along to satisfy demand.

Dig for victory

Country people ate better than most during the second world war. Any spare land was planted with vegetables such as these cabbages growing next to 34, Church St in 1960. Many people took on additional land in the form of allotments. These filled the whole of the field between the church and the brook and others were behind the council houses at 2 - 50, High Rd, adjacent to Dawes garage and behind the houses towards the top of Bury Rd.



Farmers supplied cart loads of animal manure which was usually incorporated into the soil before a potato crop. Many families kept hens for eggs and the occasional chicken dinner. Some clubbed together with neighbours to fatten a pig with much of it preserved as ham or bacon to see them through the winter. With rationing continuing when the war had ended, many families continued to grow what they could at home.

Evacuees

Country families were asked to take in child evacuees from places where heavy bombing was anticipated. Children from London, many from Walthamstow, waved their parents goodbye and arrived in Shillington to an uncertain future. It must have been a daunting experience as they waited to find out what lay in store. A few never settled in and returned home as soon as they could. Country life was very different from what they'd been used to but a few adapted well and stayed on.

Distraction therapy

To help maintain morale, dances, concerts, parties and other events took place in the village and Liberal Halls. Shillington Women's Institute thrived with regular meetings where members shared skills. Knitting, repairing clothes and upholstery, recycling rags and string into carpets and making jam and preserves were popular activities. Its members are pictured after the war in the shed that stood next to the village hall for many years.



There was little that could not be repaired, reused or recycled. Members also raised money for charities and hospitals. Some ladies though found time for a game of football in the early 1940s that the local paper covered.

MEET the all-girls soccer team from Shillington.

This picture was taken in the early 1940s and was loaned to us by Doris Saunders, nee Marshall, of Hoo Road, Meppershall.

She recalled the girls played against other local teams, including WAAF sides from RAF Henlow, to raise money for charity, mainly towards lifeboats.

The players are, back row from left, Joan Collins, Ruby Head, Winnie Jepps, Clara Matthews, George Simkins (trainer), Pat Smith, Doris Marshall, Hilda



Pearce, May Qualye. Middle row from left, Hilda Marshall, Nora Cole, Myrtle Jepps, Emmy Ingram, Iris Randall,

Ruby Wilson. Front row, from left Jean Head, Jiny Jenkins, Eileen Jenkins, Vinny Hyde, Madge Papworth,

Molly Ruff, Nancy Jepps, Frances Chamberlain. Send you old photos, together with your name, address,

and any details you have to Memory Lane, Biggleswade Chronicle, 7 High Street, Biggleswade SG18 0JB.

Tobacco use peaked during the second world war when 80% of men and 40% of women smoked to 'calm nerves'. With its impact on health going unrecognised at the time, smoking around young children was common.

A change of fortune

Despite many setbacks earlier in the war, the Allies began to regain the initiative in 1943 and hope that Hitler could be defeated rose throughout 1944 when the Normandy campaign began reclaiming Europe from the Nazis. Plans for projects at home that the war delayed were dusted off.

One small but tangible sign of progress occurred when free school milk was introduced in 1944 and a local farm supplied it to Shillington pupils.

After Germany surrendered on 8 May 1945, many servicemen returned home relatively unscathed, but others suffered life-changing injuries. The war memorial remembers another eight brave Shillington men who perished while fighting for their families, friends and country.

V. Dooley, RAF

Frederick Harold Fisher, East Lanc Regt

P.R. Hayes, 5th Beds & Herts Regt

G. Haynes, 2nd Cambs Regt

William A. Ingram, Royal Artillery

Norman Jepps, Suffolk Regt (pictured)

Albert George Walter Payne, RAF

S.J. Payne, 1st Beds & Herts Regt



VE Day

The announcement that the war in Europe had been won led to immense relief. A huge crowd assembled at the Five Bells where the piano was rolled out into Church St. Mrs Curry played it while Joby Jenkins jumped on top and sang. The crowd joined in and danced.

On VE (Victory in Europe) Day, there was a parade through Shillington.

Crowds cheered members of the Home Guard, ARP wardens, servicemen who had returned and others (pictured) as they marched along High Road.

The traditional British reserve dissipated as people celebrated.



VJ Day

Those with relatives who were fighting in the far east were unable to celebrate as fighting continued there. The dropping of atomic bombs finally forced Japan to surrender and the war ended. News of this arrived on 10 August and triggered further celebrations on VJ (Victory in Japan) Day. It took time before the men were discharged and returned to Shillington.