

Buckinghamshire in the Second World War

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We are here of course for the launch of a database derived from the Civil Defence Records, the total of bombs dropped on the county between 1939 and 1945 being 2,001 high explosive bombs and 5,633 incendiaries, and subsequently in 1944, 27 V1 flying bombs and two V2 rockets. Given that 51,509 civilians were killed in Britain as a result of German air attack between 1939 and 1945, the Bucks total may seem small: between 26 June and 31 December 1940, for example, when over 23,000 were killed in London, Bucks had just 33 fatalities, a number of them at High Duty Alloys on the Slough Trading Estate. That, however, is not the point for, if London, the glow of the fires of which were certainly seen on the northern edge of the Vale during the Blitz, was a more important target and Kent seemingly a more frontline county, Bucks was just as significant for the war effort as a whole. Moreover, even if not a single bomb had fallen on the county, it still shared the general experience of evacuation, blackout, rationing, and all the other elements of war experience that historians continue to debate in determining the impact of the war upon state, society, institution and individual.

I cannot do much more than offer a snapshot of the county at war in the time available but I do want first of all to say something about the county's significance for the overall war effort; and, secondly, something about the experience of war before I try to reach a conclusion.

In terms of the importance of Bucks, there were over 20 locations deemed major vulnerable points including Martin-Baker Aircraft at Denham, ICI Paints at Slough, Chequers, Bletchley Park, Bomber Command Headquarters at Naphill, repeater stations, and water and electricity works. There were a further 94 other designated vulnerable points and 113 factories listed for immobilisation in the event of invasion. These included the Hawker Aircraft Factory at Langley, while High Wycombe furniture firms such as Gomme, Parker Knoll, and Dancer and Hearne also undertook vital production for the Mosquito aircraft, Chiltern beech wood being a main component, and Broom and Wade made Churchill tanks. In a rather different contribution to the war effort, Ercol made millions of wooden tent pegs as well as utility furniture, while Mars continued to make chocolate for the armed forces. Not unexpectedly, most of the deliberate air raids, as opposed to random attacks or enemy aircraft clearly ditching bombs since the county lay on the German bombers' route to the Midlands, were concentrated around Slough, Langley and Wycombe. The Slough Trading Estate, indeed, was sufficiently important to be defended with a special smoke screen. The limited range of the flying bomb, of course, meant that most incidents were in the south of the county.

The breaking of the German Enigma codes at Bletchley Park was arguably one of the most significant factors in allied victory. Apart from Bletchley Park and its outstations, such as those at Hanslope and Whaddon, other locations taken over for

special purposes included the Firs at Whitchurch, sometimes referred to as Winston Churchill's Toyshop, at which MD1 produced weapons such as the Sticky Bomb and the PIAT anti-tank weapon. National treasures were stored at Princes Risborough Manor, Fawley Court and West Wycombe Park, while Wycombe Abbey was the headquarters of the 8th USAAF, and Aston Abbots became the home of the Czech government in exile, as witnessed by the bus shelter on the crossroads from Aylesbury to Wing at given by President Benes after the war. In the event of an invasion, it was deemed vital to keep open the designated 'main route' from Buckingham through Fenny Stratford to Woburn. Subsequently, Burnham Beeches became a large depot, in which 19,000 vehicles were concealed prior to the D Day landings in Normandy in June 1944. After 1942 the county also had several camps for German or Italian prisoners of war, which reminds us that many men of the 1st Bucks Battalion of the Territorial Army were themselves held in captivity for five years following their heroic defence of Hazebrouck in May 1940, enabling so many others of the British Expeditionary Force to reach Dunkirk. A reconstituted battalion returned to North West Europe in June 1944 while the county's yeomanry regiment, now 99th (Royal Bucks Yeomanry) Field Regiment, Royal Artillery also served in the Dunkirk campaign and then in Burma, taking part in the battle for Kohima in 1944. As elsewhere, therefore, families shared in the separation and sacrifice. In the case of British prisoners of war over 53,000 were brought back to England through Westcott airfield in 1945.

Mention of Westcott is a reminder that there were also 12 airfields in the county, albeit mostly training stations, and one aspect that certainly emerges from the database is the high number of incidents and fatalities arising from training accidents. The best known perhaps is the aircraft that crashed at Winslow on 7 August 1944, killing four crew and 13 civilians. Many of you will also be aware of the memorials put up in recent years at Mursley, where four crew were killed in a Wellington that hit the water tower in April 1943; Ford, where two were lost in a Wellington that crashed in January 1944; Wavendon, where another two died the same month in a Mosquito; and at Ivinghoe where two Americans were killed in a Liberator crash in November 1944. In my home village of Whitchurch, of the six men lost during the war, three were killed in air accidents, albeit not in the county.

Turning to the experience of war, a fourth of the Whitchurch war dead, who was as it happens my mother's cousin, was lost as a radio officer with the merchant navy, which reminds us, as does the database itself, that this was a 'people's war' in the sense that an older distinction between the front and the home front had disappeared. If it was now as important to outproduce as to outfight an enemy then the civilian population was a legitimate target for attack. That risk, its estimated scale far greater than actually proved the case, had resulted of course in the establishment of the ARP organisation and the Auxiliary Fire Service before the war through rural and urban district councils, the overall Emergency Committee meeting in the old County Offices across the road from us under the chairmanship of the Chief Constable. The database provides ample evidence of the activities of all the county's civil defence personnel. The WVS was also created before the war to supplement the efforts of the ARP. Its best-known efforts, however, came in the reception it provided for the women and children evacuated to the county from London. There was provision for over 116,000 evacuees though, in the event, only about 31,000 were received and many had

returned to London before the bombing began. When the latter did begin, some 12,000 new evacuees passed through the unofficial rest centres.

As in the case of many other aspects of wartime, the social and political implications of evacuation have been much debated by historians but, in practical terms, it meant that the county's overall population had increased by 35 per cent by March 1941 but with more substantial increases in some areas such as that covered by the Amersham Rural District Council with all that this implied for public services, including schools. Aylesbury Grammar School, for example, shared facilities with Ealing County Boy's School while Ealing County Girls School was transferred to High Wycombe. Rationing, too, as well as other restrictions such as the blackout affected all, as did the steady increase in wartime registration of men and women for war-related work. The impact of the war upon women in terms of employment and expectation is another hotly debated issue and apart from the women working in industry and the WVS, attention has also been drawn by historians to the Women's Land Army, of whom almost 2,000 were working in Bucks in October 1943 as the land under acreage increased from 67,000 acres before the war to over 164,000 acres by 1942.

While the emphasis today is upon the bombing database, the archives of the Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies allows us to examine all these varied aspects of the county's experience between 1939 and 1945 from the County War Agricultural Executive Committee, to local Invasion Committees, Rural and Urban District Council Emergency Committees, ARP Committees, the WVS and the Women's Land Army, evacuation, rationing, and War Savings Weeks. Beyond the collections kept locally, we also have some material relating to the county in the Mass Observation Archive at the University of Sussex. Among random snapshots of life in the county, this records that the early propaganda film made by Alexander Korda, The Lion Has Wings, was shown at the Majestic in High Wycombe in December 1939 with a civic reception, an attendance by one of Korda's studio stars, June Duprez, and over 50 RAF personnel, and a display of model aircraft from a local club and that in Aylesbury in July 1942, 25 per cent of respondents read the Daily Express. MO's diarists tended to be self-selecting and from a certain socially aware type, but they can still be useful. Thus, we have an engineering draughtsman from Buckland Wharf in Aylesbury recording his lunch at the British Restaurant in Aylesbury in August 1940 as 'Good food, well cooked and served, but helpings rather small'. As the month went on so more shortages appeared and he found himself 'unable to get cakes or pastries. Very few biscuits, no cigarettes or tobacco.' As the diary goes on it becomes apparent that lunch at the British Restaurant was an important opportunity for observation, one entry in September 1941 recording that when a large party had reserved tables in advance, 'it was very amusing to note how the regulars who had lost their usual places looked very peeved at the intruders'. That same month he joined the Aylesbury Choral Society, finding as large attendance. By contrast, a woman from a village near Slough recorded in June 1942 that shopping in the town was 'revolting. Weather oppressive, all suburbia in town, damn all in the shops'. Trying to get two pairs of curtains cleaned, one firm took no household goods and another was closed for the day. Apparently, only one cleaner's in the town had a van and its journeys were 'so unpredictable it is easier to take and fetch one's goods personally'. Later that day, she cycled into the village to pay bills, collect the weekly ration, leave fizzy water bottles at the tobacconists, and to collect a pair of shoes which the cobbler 'promised me last

week would be ready today but weren't.' Well, war clearly does not change everything.

Among private or family papers in the Centre for Bucks Studies there is the wartime diary of the Rev. Peter Hemming of Shenley, and the extensive collection of Eric Basden of Farnham Royal. Among other aspects of wartime life, Basden's papers shed light on the Local Defence Volunteers and Home Guard. Following Anthony Eden's radio-broadcast after the 9 p.m. news on 14 May 1940, inviting men aged between 17 and 65 to report to local police stations, here as elsewhere there was an immediate response. 158 men enlisted at Haddenham within the first 24 hours and 258 at Marlow. There were 3,584 LDV in Bucks by 29 May and 18,665 by August, the total eventually reaching 19,816 men by May 1943. At one point there were thirteen battalions though one was disbanded in 1942 with its manpower transferred to a heavy anti-aircraft battery and a rocket battery at Slough.

We tend now to see the Home Guard very much in the light of the immensely successful BBC Dad's Army series rather than the increasingly sophisticated academic analysis of recent years with an emphasis upon the social and political impact of the Home Guard. Indeed, two feminist historians have even subjected the Home Guard to a gendered reassessment. Undeniably, there were comic moments. On 18 May 1940 the South Midlands Area command helpfully informed the Bucks Zone command that German parachutists are 'desperate men between the ages of 17 and 50 - fanatics and on 6 June the Air Ministry offered the further advice that they might be disguised as 'British troops, clergymen, nuns, ordinary civilians, etc'. It has always struck me that when you consider how few nuns you tend to see in this country in normal times, the arrival of large numbers might well have looked suspicious. In line with the 'Look, Duck and Vanish' epithet, first coined I think by Tommy Trinder, the standing orders of the 4th Battalion included 'In the event of observing German parachutists landing, telephone High Wycombe 26'. There were tensions with the ARP, not least in Great Missenden in September 1941 when a Home Guard cautioned the Chief Warden for leaving his car unlocked and not immobilised outside the ARP Centre. Similarly, there was a long and ultimately fruitless correspondence between D Company of the 1st Battalion in and Benskins Brewery in the same year after the landlord of the Bernard Arms at Great Kimble 'was heard to say that those present were more like Boys Scouts than Home Guard, or some such phrase of that kind'.

Leaving aside the popular image, the danger seemed real enough in the summer of 1940, the greatest danger being judged to be between 8 and 10 September 1940 with some church bells being rung erroneously in southern and eastern counties on 7 September, though there had also been an earlier 'Panic Sunday' in Bucks on 7 July when many roadblocks had been hastily erected. In the face of possible invasion, C Company of the 1st Battalion had just 34 assorted rifles and 50 shotguns for its 286 men on 28 May. In June, the entire battalion received just 75 rifles, of which 30 were allocated to Aylesbury and three to each of 15 surrounding villages. The Aylesbury Defence Scheme allocated these to six roadblocks on the Oxford, Buckingham, Bicester, Leighton Buzzard, Wendover and Tring roads, together with a so-called keep in the old County Offices. Though the image is one of elderly ex-servicemen, actual figures suggest otherwise. The Stoke Mandeville platoon, for example, reported only 23 per cent of its members with previous military experience in May 1940 while a sample of 900 Bucks Home Guard enlisted in 1940-41 from 12 of the 60 boxes of

Bucks enlistment forms held by the Army Medal Office yields only 35.8 per cent with previous military experience and an average age of 35. Slowly, of course, weaponry improved as the danger receded though there was still felt to be a possibility of German suicide raids on the approach to D Day in 1944.

Another popular image is of a predominantly rural force but even in a largely agricultural county such as Bucks, there was a significant urban component with contingents from Hazells, Hunt Barnard, Northern Dairies, Hills and Partridge, and Bifurcated Rivets in the 1st Battalion; the 8th and 9th Battalions drawn from the Slough Trading Estate; the 12th with a large contingent from the LMS at Bletchley; and the 13th Battalion raised entirely from Hawkers Aircraft Factory at Langley. The 71st HAA Battery at Slough brought down a flying bomb on 15 June 1944, which brings us back neatly to the database, and a conclusion.

The incidental detail of the database is often illuminating. A case of what might be termed friendly fire as at Ivinghoe in April 1944; a random bombing at Marlow in October 1940; the appalling case of children being machine gunned in the street at Swanbourne in March 1941 but fortunately without casualties, and so on. It brings home not only what it meant to be at war between 1939 and 1945 but also the value and the extraordinary riches of the Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies in illuminating all of our pasts.