

## WICKHAM IN WWII

### THE DEFENCE OF THE REALM

Originally known as the Local Defence Force, the Home Guard was commanded by Lt. General Herbert Powell who had commanded Gurkhas in WWI. For the first year they were only armed with shotguns and farm implements. Rifles arrived from the USA in 1941. They mustered in The Star public house on the corner of Wickham Square.

Greystones in Titchfield Lane is the last house before the parish boundary. A unit of the Home Guard were stationed there in readiness to blow up Tapnage railway tunnel if the Germans invaded.

On the outskirts of Wickham, disused vehicles were placed by the roadside ready to be pulled onto the roads if the invasion came. The Meon Valley railway line was closed to passenger traffic and an anti-aircraft truck travelled back and forth under cover of the woods. The station at Droxford saw the



meeting of Churchill, Eisenhower and Montgomery for the planning of the D-Day landings and the war leaders used a carriage on the Meon Valley Line to meet. Prior to D-Day, the railway line was in constant use ferrying troops and material to their assembly points.

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Many houses in the village were used to billet soldiers, the officers being billeted in The King's Head and Thorne's Cottage.

The children were evacuated to the West Country and Rookesbury Park School was taken over by an Army Motor Transport Unit of the RASC ATS which became responsible for ferrying men and material to the embarkation ports as D-Day approached. The Forge garage in Wickham became an RASC transport workshop.

The Royal Navy took over Beverly as a maternity home for Naval wives who had been evacuated from Haslar Hospital to make room for war casualties. Births were recorded in the Wickham Register.

American troops, stationed at Shedfield House and Hall Court, (where many coffins were stored), became friends with the people of Wickham and were much liked. They built a diving board for the villagers at the ornamental

lakes in Biddenfield Lane. Prior to D-Day, American tanks were seen parked in The Square.

The 51st Highland Division were encamped under canvas at Rookery Nook on the Southwick Road. There was a searchlight battery on Wickham Common and anti-aircraft batteries in Black Cottage Lane, Blind Lane and on Shedfield Common.

An RAF Hurricane was shot down and the pilot baled out, landing in a tree near the Liberty, (now the Roebuck Inn). He was rescued and spent the night in the King's Head. A Spitfire belly-landed in Station Field near Northfields Farm.

Huge army camps were set up at Rookesbury Park and the Liberty just prior to D-Day.

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The “Wickham Wall” memorial notice was carved by two men of the 38th Reconnaissance Corps in August 1944 on a wall near the church close to where they were encamped before they transferred to Holland and Germany. It was twice destroyed by passing traffic. A facsimile plaque can today be seen on the wall of the Church Room, adjacent to St Nicholas Church .

### **THE HOME FRONT**

The Wickham “armaments factory” was established at Park Place where ladies sorted used nuts and bolts for use in factories elsewhere.

Land Army girls arrived from the towns to work on the local farms. Wickham Common was ploughed up for the Dig for Victory campaign.

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At Shirrell Heath, a team, including men of Wickham, assembled aircraft drop tanks. The Southdown Bus Garage in Mill Lane was utilised by a group of ladies who made camouflage netting in shifts while the buses were out on the streets.

Several trainloads of evacuees arrived from the East End of London, but the majority did not stay for long, not taking to village life too well.

Run by local volunteers of the Wickham WVS, The Victory Hall was used as a canteen



for troops. The hall was used as a base for Toc-H and also as a base for the local ARP. Local dances were very popular with the troops. The King's Head was used as a Pioneer Corps canteen.

## AIR RAIDS

Land mines landed in the countryside close to Wickham, but the only building bombed in the village was Hemings the ironmonger and hardware shop. An incendiary bomb came through the roof but fortunately spared their *continued...*



valuable, (to the war effort), stock of wooden wheel barrows! The fire was put out by the family with the help of the landlord of The White Lion who was on fire duty that night. An Auxiliary Fire Crew was formed and equipped with a trailer pump afterwards.

A bomb fell in Mill Lane, fracturing the water main. An above surface air raid shelter was constructed in The Square but was not very popular due to lack of facilities.

A register of available housing was drawn up so that housing could quickly be found for anyone bombed out of their homes.

In order to keep the Royal Charter alive, a minimal Wickham Fair was run every year throughout the war.

### **THE BUILD-UP TO D-DAY**

Most of the planning for D-Day took place at headquarters in and near London. At the

time when the D-Day landings were launched, however, the Allied commanders wanted to be closer to the assault troops and the ports from which they would leave.



In 1943, with the planning for D-Day already underway, Southwick House, not far from Wickham, was chosen to be the location of the advance command post of the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force.

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In 1944, in the months leading up to D-Day, Southwick House became the headquarters of the main allied commanders, including Naval Commander-in-Chief Admiral Ramsay, Allied Supreme Commander, General Eisenhower and the Army Commander-in-Chief, General Montgomery. Eisenhower and Montgomery's headquarters were not actually in Southwick House, but were hidden away in several woods nearby.

Prior to D-Day, Wickham village and its environs were flooded with troops and war material; Englishmen and men of the Commonwealth, trucks and tanks by the score. The people of Wickham welcomed their visitors and tried to make them comfortable within their limited resources. Churchill, Eisenhower and



*VE-Day children's party in The Square*

De Gaul were sometimes seen walking and chatting outside Wickham's Tea Room.



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