

Clanfield and Bampton Historical Society

Oxfordshire was spared much of the physical devastation of the second World War, but still played a huge part in the war effort, as Liz Woolley told the society in the first talk of the 2014-15 season: a talk that produced more reaction by way of personal stories and reminiscences from the audience that packed into Clanfield's Carter Institute than any I can remember, writes Alan Smith.

Liz Woolley, Oxford resident and a prominent local historian, has been working with the Soldiers of Oxford Trust since 2010 to establish their new museum in Woodstock, which opened in 2014, and much of the research she did for her talk was on behalf of the Trust. Although entitled 'Children and War: Experiences of World War II in Oxfordshire', it was a comprehensive, detailed, sometimes humorous and often emotional survey of much of life in the county between 1939 and 1945.

Airfields – there were 27 of them – and Army camps took over large areas of the county, for training and for rest and recuperation, but even so, there was not enough room, and Leaffield residents remember bombs being stacked by the roadside. Cowley housed the national headquarters of the Civilian Repair Organisation, which repaired some 80,000 aircraft; clinical trials of penicillin at the Radcliffe Infirmary, Oxford, radically altered healthcare for troops and civilians; and thousands of refugees found a safe haven.

With men away fighting, women took on many of their jobs: from 200 before the war, nearly 2,500 were employed at Pressed Steel in Cowley; they worked at Morris Motors and De Havilland's aircraft factory in Witney; others took jobs as bus drivers, motor cyclists and postwomen.

Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's speech, announcing that Britain was at war with Germany, was broadcast at 11.15am on Sunday, 3rd September, 1939, and was relayed during the morning service at St Giles' Church, Oxford. One who was there remembered: 'As the solemn words of Mr Chamberlain echoed through the building there was a deep hush, and for a few minutes after he finished we sat there immovable, until the voice of Canon Diggle, the vicar, was heard leading us in prayer'.

There was such an innocence about what this meant, especially of course among the young. Chloe Fisher, aged 7 and living in North Oxford, asked what a war was, and when told there were two sides got the firm impression that it would take place on a tennis court. A year later Chloe was among some 13,000 youngsters evacuated overseas to Canada, the USA, Australia and New Zealand. Chloe was sent, with her 6 year old brother Stephen, to Canada. She was there for five years and 'every day wished to be home'.

Although 3,800 bombs fell on Oxfordshire, most landed in open country and did little damage; air raids killed 20 people and injured 60 in the county. Two bombs fell on Witney on the night of November 21st, 1940, damaging 220 buildings but with no serious casualties; Leslie Bishop recalled that, at first, Hitler and Mussolini were just cartoon characters in his comics, but: 'Then two bombs fell on Witney, one landing on Church Green, the other behind the Eagle Brewery. They blew my grandmother out of bed, and it was at this point that I began to take Hitler quite seriously'.

The most serious incident in Oxford came in May, 1941, when a Whitley bomber crashed on a cottage in Linton Road, killing the crew and badly injuring the three residents. A Wellington crashed by The Weald, Bampton, and again all the crew died.

The daily lives of almost everyone was changing, especially because of the evacuation, mostly of children, throughout the county. There were, Liz Woolley told us, three waves of evacuation in

Britain: the first began on 1st September, 1939, the day after Hitler invaded Poland, when 1.5 million children were moved from major cities to the countryside in three days; the second in 1940 in response to the threat of invasion after the fall of France, when some 200,000 people were moved out of danger areas such as coastal towns, and 20,000 were sent abroad; and the third in March, 1944, affecting about 1 million people, when flying bombs threatened London and south-east England.

Even before the war Oxfordshire was already home to refugees from Europe. In May 1937 nearly 4,000 Basque children, with teachers, helpers and priests, arrived in Britain, seeking shelter from the Spanish Civil War; there were four residential homes for them in Oxfordshire, the largest at Buscot Park, and also at Thame, Shipton-under-Wychwood and Westfield House at Aston. Between 1938 and early 1939 nearly 10,000 children, mainly Jewish, came to Britain from Nazi Germany, and some of the boys were housed at Abingdon School.

But, as Liz also told us, these numbers were small compared to those who flooded into Oxfordshire, from as early as 1st September, 1939; children, all labelled, arriving by train with gas masks and sandwiches, at Oxford, Banbury and other stations. In just three days Oxfordshire took in nearly 20,000 official evacuees, plus an unknown number who had made their own arrangements.

For the most part these evacuations went remarkably smoothly, but inevitably there were problems, with trains arriving late or missing their intended destinations altogether. Benson had a group of evacuees who were meant for Weston super Mare, and Wantage took in children from West Ham who were supposed to be going to Somerset; they were on a non-corridor train and the call of nature proved so strong they had to be deposited early at Wantage, and stayed there.

At Charlbury volunteers were expecting about 100 London schoolchildren, and at the last minute were told that three bus-loads of pregnant women and mothers with babies and young children were on their way instead.

Schools often had to accommodate not only their own pupils but also the evacuees, so that sometimes lessons were divided – locals in the morning, evacuees in the afternoon, for example – and school days could be disrupted by air-raid practices and warnings, when they would have to scurry to the nearest shelter.

But some evacuees received no education at all. One of the most harrowing stories Liz told us was of Ted Mitchell, who was 4½ when war broke out. He was evacuated from his home in Walthamstow, and had a number of billets before he and his younger sister ended up in a hostel, Wroxton House, near Banbury, for 40 ‘unbilletables’, simply because their parents wanted them to be together. Few families wanted brothers and sisters, simply because they did not have two rooms to spare.

Even though they were in the same building together for 4½ years boys and girls were segregated and he rarely saw his sister. It was, said Ted, a harsh regime; there were so few staff the children did all the chores, the cane was used liberally and bullying by older boys was rife. Boys over 5 were locked out of the house all day, except for meals, and Ted spent most of his time wondering the fields and, later, working on farms. There was a school in the village but Wroxton House children did not go there. Ted recalled: ‘The children in the village called us “dirty, smelly vaccies” and when possible used us as punchbags. It is that memory of being alone with no one to turn to that has stayed with me, and always will.’

Liz Woolley had other sad stories to tell us, but happier ones as well. Many of the children were from London's East End, for some of whom life on a farm was a revelation and, in Artin Cornish's words 'Absolutely wonderful'.

Lifetime friendships often resulted from these evacuations. Wendy Rich of South Oxford corresponded with evacuee Edwina until she died a few years ago, and still writes to her sister Audrey; Grace Aldridge and a friend returned for summer holidays with the couple who looked after them during the war at Adderbury Manor.

Sylvia Mills said that the years she spent evacuated to Wheatley were the happiest time of her life: 'It was a really, really lovely experience and I have only got happy memories. Mr & Mrs Edwards lived in a house with an outside loo and they grew vegetables in their garden, so they were not a wealthy couple, but they taught me everything I knew and were a lovely couple'.

Though most lived in normal houses, some schools were evacuated en masse and needed bigger premises: 400 pupils from Malvern College took up residence at Blenheim Palace, while Lord Faringdon moved into his lodge so that schools from Poplar and Ancester could use Buscot Park.

The local children grew up fast in those years. Brian Mobely remembers 'troops coming home and being marched to Cowley Barracks. I could never understand why those chaps were made to march from Oxford station to Cowley absolutely exhausted, nobody laid on buses. We kids all sort of got around and carried their kitbags. They were half-dressed, half naked, bandaged, wounded, a completely shell-shocked, demoralized army'.

By contrast the arrival of American troops caused great excitement - and some linguistic confusion. Leslie Bishop, then a schoolboy in Witney, recollected: 'My friend and I were returning home after a visit to the Palace Cinema in Market Square. Two very young GIs standing under the Buttercross called out desperately "Hey, kid - where do you find the chippies here?" Not knowing that "chippy" was US slang for a prostitute we shouted to them "Well, there are two in Corn Street, but at this time of night you'll have to queue!"'

It was a great start to the season. All of our meetings begin at 7.30pm, and are in the Carter Institute, Clanfield, except for those on March 18 and May 20, which will be in the Bampton Village Hall. I shall be delighted to see you at any or all of them.

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