

Wartime Dover

Perhaps prompted by reading some of the wartime memories of Budge Adams, printed in issues 27 and 28 of the Newsletter, two members, Mr Maurice Wilson and Mr S.S.G. Hale, have sent contributions relating some of their experiences in Dover during World War II. They make interesting reading. *EDITOR*

Maurice Wilson

who lives in Weaving Street, Maidstone, writes:-

I was born in Dover in 1927 at a nursing home near the corner of Maison Dieu Road and Taswell Street, and lived in Heathfield Avenue until I was evacuated with the Dover Boys' County School to Ebbw Vale in 1940. Even then I returned home for the school holidays until I left school in 1943, returning to Dover to join my parents (Dad was the Manager of the Maypole Dairy Co. at 48 Biggin Street, next to the King's Hall, a cinema) at their new address in Markland Road.

My first school was Miss Lindsey's, from age five until eight, when I joined Miss Rookwood's class at the County School. In those days it was normal to walk to school if there wasn't a convenient bus route, and my normal route, which it was accepted you did on your own, was down to Barton Path, along to Beaconsfield Road, across the London Road to the raised part (Buckland Terrace) then up past the Chapel to the allotments that ran above Union Road (Coombe Valley Road) and behind the Isolation Hospital in Noah's Ark Road to the top entrance of the school - I believe this walk will be remembered by at least one of our Vice-Presidents! But from the age of ten I graduated to a bike, which was very much easier.

Dover was always a garrison town and we became very used to the Navy and the Army - and each regiment in those days had its own band so there was always an opportunity to listen to them, either playing for the hymns at the Morning Service

in the Castle Church or, on any Sunday, on the parade ground at the Grand Shaft Barracks, apart from the special treats, like "Beating the Retreat" on the Sea Front or marching through the town in ceremonial style on their arrival or departure. That's how I saw my first Mounted Band and may explain why to this day I am still very fond of brass bands.

Also there were many then unexplained happenings around us at that time - for example, the erection of the massive steel towers behind the Castle. Not until much later did we learn they were for Radio-Location (Radar).

After the War started and the Germans neared the Channel Coast we children quickly learnt about war - in truth, we quite enjoyed it, particularly when the Messerschmitts shot down the barrage balloons that then adorned our town, keeping a score and rushing to pick up the shrapnel, although we soon learnt it would be very hot if we were too quick! Youngsters have no real sense of danger.

One of my most vivid memories of that time was standing on the Admiralty Pier watching all the destroyers and other ships, three or four deep, unloading our troops from Dunkirk to be taken away by train after train. The following week all the local schools joined that railway line as well, and at many stations as we passed through Kent there were volunteers, W.V.S., Mothers' Union, etc., waiting to give buns and cups of tea to the weary troops as the trains pulled up to wait for a

free line ahead. It must have been a nightmare for the railway authorities to organise, although we didn't think of it as such at the time.

After that, from 1941 onwards, when I returned home for the holidays I travelled by bus and always had to show my Registration details at the public house outside Swanley, for non-residents were not allowed into the area.

I left Wales for good in 1943, aged sixteen, and first joined the Borough Treasurer's office for about three months until I started in the Westminster Bank. This was in the long building on the corner of the Market Square and King Street, a single storey some sixteen feet wide at the beginning, leading to a two-storey office block above the Manager's Room. This design resulted in a very long underground area, partly a safe where customers' boxes were stored and three other areas for storage, etc. Normally all staff worked in the Banking Hall but during shelling (to which Dover was subjected from 12th August 1940 until the 26th September 1944) we left the front door open and went down to the main safe where we had set up a counter so that work could still carry on for customers to attend to their business and then wait, if they wished, during long shelling sessions. When this happened, they shared our lunch of sandwiches (the new 'Spam' was very popular) prepared by the ledger keeper. Our typist and adding machine operator shared another cellar, shored up by baulks of timber, while another storage room was occupied outside business hours by fire-watchers, whom I had to join from time to time. Another of my duties at that time was to visit the two upper storeys to check the sand and water buckets, this part of the building being unoccupied and derelict, due to war damage. The bank building was damaged at least sixteen times during the War and it was the bank itself that persevered to keep a service going.

In order to help in this, the main windows, some ten feet high and five feet wide, had been removed and replaced

by a double brick reinforced wall, except for a very small window high up. The Westminster was not the only bank that stayed open during raids and shelling, for while Lloyds and the National Provincial, also in the Market Square, closed, Barclays in Cannon Street and the Midland in Pencester Road, kept open. It may seem surprising that so many businesses kept going, but there wasn't a lot of choice, for until 1944, at least, shelling and raids were quite sporadic, with sometimes days or even weeks between attacks. And you still had to get home for lunch or after work - all you did was to cycle a little faster through the likely shelling areas! Shells tended to land in Dover in more or less set lines, and it was widely thought that this was because many of the guns were on curving railway tracks and they tended to stop in the same place before firing. This 'straight line of explosions' can be seen by a close check of a map published by the *Dover Express* many years ago, and the line I always sped through was the one running from the western side of the Market Square, on behind the Post Office, on to De Burgh Street and on further. It is not correct to think that all Dover inhabitants of that time rushed to the caves at every incident - there were many, including all the people I knew, who never saw the inside of any of them!

Altogether 2226 shells, 464 bombs and three parachute mines fell in Dover during the War and in the four years between 1940 and 1944, German guns opened fire, either on convoys in the Straits or on the town itself, sometimes in retaliation to our own guns on top of the cliffs towards St. Margaret's Bay opening fire or more often on suspected troop movements or just plain 'bloody-mindedness'. The alert (the normal air raid warning sounded twice) was sounded and the alert continued until usually one hour after the last shell had fallen. Sometimes the Germans fired another soon after the hour was up, and everybody was very annoyed! At the end,

32 however, as our troops (Canadians, I seem to remember) neared the Calais area shelling became almost continuous, in the last day starting at two a.m. with seven in the first hour. More shells were fired in the sea around ten o'clock and at midday the all clear sounded. Before long another shell heralded the beginning of three hours continuous bombardment, the very last shell falling on the opposite side of the Market Square (on Hubbard's Umbrella Shop, where the TSB is now) at quarter past seven in the evening of Tuesday, 26th September 1944. And when it was announced by the Mayor, through the loudspeakers that had been put on lampposts throughout the main street, that all the gun sites had been captured music was played for the rest of the day. One certain tune - 'Once aboard the lugger, and the girl is mine' - seemed most popular, being played many times throughout the day!

Before then, however, the doodlebug

raids had started and while not many fell in Dover, some hitting the cliffs as they came in flying too low to clear, others were shot down by RAF fighters or by the ack-ack guns that had been set up around the coast, some even on our Sea Front. I can still remember being woken one night by a loud harsh vibrating noise and looking through my bedroom window in Markland Road seeing this strange light crossing the sky just above Plum Pudding Hill. When daylight came and we could see these little pilotless planes heading inland we realised what was going on but it was some time before early one morning we saw many other planes heading in the opposite direction above the same hill, plane after plane, mostly Dakotas and other planes pulling gliders, on their way, we learned later, for Arnhem and Nijmegen.

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Dover Boyhood Blitz

A contribution from S.S.G. Hale, who lives in Temple Ewell

I was eight years of age on the 15th of August 1940 and my only birthday gift was a wrist watch. The overwound watch was returned within a week to the Biggin Street watchmaker and I was not to see that watch again for many years.

At the beginning of June the WVS made mountains of sandwiches and brewed gallons of tea which was distributed in huge brown teapots by Cubs and Scouts to the carpet of soldiers lying on the Marine Station platforms. Tea was poured into helmets, mess tins, tobacco tins, any container because the Cubs were too small to carry cups and the soldiers seemed to have left everything at Dunkirk. Southern Railway cleared all the soldiers and the following Sunday all the school children too. But there were still plenty of people to watch the skies.

In July the Stuka dive-bombers concentrated on the harbour but they were vulnerable and even the anti-aircraft gunners managed to down a few and the RAF fighters sorted out the rest. But then the Navy scarpers to Portsmouth leaving only a few MTBs and air-sea rescue launches with Dutch and Norwegian crews which sheltered in the East Cliff submarine pens.

In August a BBC commentator was criticised for reporting the dog-fights in the style of a sports engagement - but that is exactly what it was like. Every downed plane was one of theirs and every victor was one of ours. The after-match scores in 1945 indicated a draw rather than the home win originally claimed. But a Jerry away win was necessary for a successful invasion because the home team still had