

SOCIETY MEETINGS

The November 2003 Meeting

10 MAY 1940 *Reported by Derek Leach*

A packed meeting was waiting to discover why Reg Colman had entitled his talk '10 May 1940'. Our curiosity was soon satisfied - it was the day that Winston Churchill became prime minister.

In 1940 Reg was fourteen years old. His home in Croydon was bombed and he moved to Exmouth where he went to the grammar school. Armed with spades the boys were sent to the beach where they dug a trench to repel Hitler's tanks. Every Saturday he bought 'War Illustrated,' price 3d, to keep up with the news, which at that time was all about 'strategic withdrawals' rather than retreats.

Turning to his subject, Reg outlined the formula for leadership: knowing where the initiative lies (who is the decision maker) and any decisions must be capable of effective application - quite simple in a dictatorship, but more difficult in a democracy. Churchill exercised these qualities through his words and charisma.

What helped to make Churchill the man he was? Scholarship (despite not doing well at Harrow), mastery of detail (speeches were revised again and again before delivery), great

personal courage (as a war correspondent, as a soldier and his escape from the Boers) and the unscrupulous exploitation of personal contacts.

Until 1939 there was a very strong peace movement in the UK. British people did not know, or ignored, the terrible things that were happening in Germany. Politicians were content with Hitler absorbing into Germany surrounding German-populated areas. Chamberlain's ultimatum followed Hitler reneging on his promises, occupying the Sudetenland and invading Poland.

Churchill, out of office during the 1930s, had obtained information about Hitler's activities including German rearmament and had spoken out about the threat he posed, gaining a reputation as a warmonger. People at last realised that he had been right all along. With war declared, Churchill returned to government as First Lord of the Admiralty and the famous signal went round the Royal Navy, 'Winston's back'. During the first three months there were major naval losses. Churchill was anxious to take the war to the Germans by floating mines down the Rhine and by denying Swedish iron ore to them by

controlling neutral Norway. Unfortunately, this gave Hitler the excuse to invade Denmark and Norway. The Anglo-French force sent to Norway met with disaster and the government, with a large Tory majority, was heavily criticised. Chamberlain was the focus for the opposition, 'You have sat too long. For God's sake go!' Churchill stayed loyal. Following a vote of confidence, a coalition government was decided upon, but Labour would not have Chamberlain as prime minister. Churchill was preferred over Halifax and on 10 May 1940 he became prime minister, fulfilling what he thought was his destiny. Very quickly he formed a small war cabinet comprising five politicians and the three service heads with himself as Minister of Defence - making it much easier for the Prime Minister and the Minister to agree! His policy was made clear to everyone with his 'Blood, toil, tears and sweat' speech, creating the atmosphere to prosecute the war certain of ultimate victory, despite the overwhelming might of

Germany.

Churchill in charge was a mixed blessing for those in command. He was a nightmare with fingers in every pie and wanted to be everywhere, despite being 65 in 1940. George VI had to stop him from joining in the Normandy landings. His example made a big impact upon the troops, exuding confidence based upon knowledge from personal experience fighting in the Boer Wars and the First World War when out of office.

Party politics returned with the general election campaign of 1945. The Tories made a grave mistake in concentrating their efforts upon Churchill, the man who had won the war, as the man for winning the peace, rather than pushing peace time policies. Labour won a landslide victory. Churchill was out, but time had produced the right man for the hour.

So ended another fascinating talk by Reg Colman delivered, as always, without any notes and ending bang on time much to the delight of our Chairman!

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THE ROYAL CINQUE PORTS

A talk by Dick Bolton..... *Reported by Merril Lilley*

The second speaker of the evening, Lt. Col. Dick Bolton, gave a witty and entertaining address on various aspects of the Cinque Ports, with appropriate illustrations.

He first reminded his audience of the names of the ports, the principal

ones of Hastings, New Romney, Hythe, Dover and Sandwich, which were the original five, and the two 'Antient Towns' of Winchelsea and Rye, which later became head ports in their own right.

He began with some historical