

# Memories 1939

**Terry Sutton**

Eighty years ago, in 1939, was a dramatic and worrying time in Dover and throughout the nation. Throughout the early months of the year Dover was preparing for a threatened war which eventually came in September. For those still alive today who can forget those frightening words in September from prime minister Neville Chamberlain: "consequently this country is at war with Germany."

Memories of 1939 were revived for me when two journalists from Finland visited Dover in a hunt for anyone who could remember those days. They were especially interested because, in 1939, Finland and Russia were at war. I was able to tell them of my memory that early in 1939 there was mysterious talk in Dover about a 'death ray' being beamed from wooden masts erected at Swingate. We were told it was top secret, not for discussion, but car drivers claimed their vehicles had suddenly been brought to a standstill on the Deal-Dover road near the masts. We now know, of course, these wooden masts (later replaced by steel masts) were involved with radio location, now known as radar.

These were the days of fears of possible German spies in and around the Town, Port and Garrison of Dover. As ten-year-old I was always on the look-out for them!

In April 1939 there was a serious clash of views about evacuation. The government decided that the Dover area would be just the place to receive evacuees from the Medway towns. Dover Borough councillors, some with memories of the 1914-18 war,

told Whitehall this was a daft idea because Dover was sure to be the target of air raids. Eventually Whitehall agreed and made Dover a neutral area: neither receiving evacuees nor making the town an evacuation zone. By 1940, with the enemy on the cliffs at Calais, there was a rapid change of mind as Dover became an evacuation area.

In 1938 and in 1939 we queued up at the fire station where volunteers fitted up with gas masks - horrible smelling things. If war came, gas attacks were expected.

In February, Dover's air raid sirens were sounded for the first time, later also to be used for shelling raids. Bags of sand were prepared to dampen any fire bombs that might be dropped on the town.

The Dover authorities decided to move the stained glass windows from the Town Hall, the windows we still enjoy today. In 1939 they were taken down and stored for safety



*Trocadero Bars*

in tunnels under Dover Castle.

Work, started in 1938, continued in 1939 on the extension of tunnels that had earlier been excavated in the cliffs and in quarries. There was controversy between the Dover authorities and Whitehall over who should pay for this work. In the months ahead these tunnels were to become the home for many.

Dover's menfolk returned to gardens where, in the crisis of 1938, they had worked together to dig communal shelters in case there were air raids. Some of these men had served in the trenches in World War One and they remembered the danger of flying splinters. The design of the shelters was intended to give protection against splinters and shrapnel falling from anti-aircraft guns.

As the months of 1939 drifted towards the declaration of war in September, shops were busy selling material that could be, and was, used as black-out curtains to ensure no house lighting helped guide enemy pilots. Later many Dover windows were criss-crossed with strips of sticky paper to prevent glass splintering if bombs fell.

How well I remember that Sunday morning of September 3rd in 1939 when, minutes after the declaration of war, Dover's sirens wailed out. I was scared. Any moment, I feared, enemy aircraft would be zooming over the hills to bomb Dover. My teacher, 'Barney' Taylor at Barton Road School, had told us one bomb would completely wipe out Dover. And in 1939 we believed what teachers taught us!

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## COWGATE CEMETERY

Jeremy Cope

Summer has arrived, although looking out of the window at the rain reminds me of the variable nature of our weather. However, rain will get the grass growing with ever more vigour!

With the closure of the Night Shelter in March, the tents have returned and although most occupants are tidy, it only needs one careless person to make the work of our litter-clearers, led by Deborah, somewhat onerous. A comment on the times we live in! Apart from this we continue to manage the "bullies" – Angelica and likeminded plants that tend to crowd out so many smaller ones. Over the years we have seen a large increase in primroses and similar plants and of course grasses, which says something for our efforts! John and Jean continue with the never ending job of trying to control the ivy, particularly that covering tomb stones. This helps if

visitors are looking for evidence in their genealogical researches.

We have had further feedback from Melanie at WCCP on the maintenance of the site in such a way as to encourage its use by wildlife. I will update as we develop the ideas she has provided.

A big 'thankyou' to Dover Town Council for providing us means to store our equipment. It is very much appreciated with a special thankyou to Jim Peacock for his input and help.

If you would like to join our happy band then please contact me on 01304 211348 or email [jeremycope@willersley.plus.com](mailto:jeremycope@willersley.plus.com). We usually work the first Thursday morning and the second Saturday morning in the month but this varies according to the weather and holidays.