

COMMEMORATING VE DAY



WHAT IS VE DAY

VE Day, or Victory in Europe Day, marks 8 May 1945, when Allied forces formally accepted Nazi Germany's unconditional surrender, ending World War II in Europe.

WHAT HAPPENED IN GREAT AND LITTLE PLUMSTEAD IN WORLD WAR II?

The quiet rhythm of rural life in these fruit growing Norfolk villages was profoundly altered by the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. The atmosphere would have been one of uncertainty and a gradual shift towards a nation at war. Wartime regulations, such as the introduction of identity cards for all British citizens, would have been implemented, requiring everyone to carry them at all times. Rationing was introduced in the United Kingdom on 8 January 1940. The first items to be rationed were bacon, butter, and sugar. Over time, the list expanded to include meat, tea, jam, clothing, petrol, and other goods. War charity collections took place, with local children taking part. One man who shared his recollections said -

“Living through our childhood in those wartime years we probably got away with adventures that would be frowned upon today but we knew nothing much of pre-war life so all the happenings of war seemed quite normal and provided us with plenty of excitement if at times it got a bit scary. In my child’s mind, though, I never ever thought it possible that we could lose the war; England could never be beaten. I suppose those thoughts were planted in my mind by our parents. Looking back now it all seems a bit unreal.”

Bob Simmons

Source - <https://littleplumsteadmemories.wordpress.com/adventures-of-bob-simmons/>

COMMEMORATING VE DAY



AIR RAIDS

The residents of Great and Little Plumstead lived under the constant threat of air raids, a pervasive anxiety shared by communities across Britain. Air raid precautions were an integral part of daily life, and there are records of air raid shelters being dug. From September 1, 1939, the blackout was strictly enforced, requiring households and businesses to ensure no light escaped that could aid enemy bombers navigating at night.

Local residents have written recollections on their experience -

“There was an air-raid shelter in the school grounds, where the older children would be led once the siren went. The infants would come to a shelter in the garden of the Police House. Everyone would remain below ground until the All Clear sounded. The shelters were dug deep into the ground with steps leading down. They were lined with board inside and the tops were covered with corrugated iron and a protective pile of soil.

As my family were expected to sleep in our shelter if there was a bad air-raid, bunks had been built round the side, and the infants used to sit on these while the teachers would read to them or keep them occupied by singing. Fortunately these air-raids only happened once or twice in the daytime.” Rosemary Turner (Hardesty)

Source - <https://littleplumsteadmemories.wordpress.com/>

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EVACUEES ARRIVE

When war broke out and bombs began falling on London, rural villages like Little Plumstead opened their doors to evacuee children seeking safety. For local families, the sudden arrival of these city youngsters brought both new friendships and moments of friction. Memories shared by John Oakley and Bob Simmons paint a vivid picture of those early wartime days - of unfamiliar faces arriving on Plumstead Green and Sandy Lane, of lives briefly intertwined, and of gardens becoming battlegrounds as evacuees adjusted to their new country surroundings.

“I do remember the arrival of the evacuees coming from London in the early part of the war. Peter Barton, a tall ginger haired boy, and his sister, Stella, lived on Plumstead Green, and Alec and Tony Brown lived in Sandy Lane. Bernard and Walter Moss, who lived on Reeves Corner, were also evacuated here for a short time.”

John Oakley

“During the war we had children at the school who were evacuated from London to the country and some of these children were billeted I believe with the Knights family and possible the Crisp family who also lived on Witton Green. One of the girls I recall was June Crisp. When the evacuees arrived at the school we were told to make them welcome and were showing them our gardens when one of the boys ran all over mine kicking out the newly planted vegetables which resulted in a fight with the two of us rolling around on the ground.” Bob Simmons

COMMEMORATING VE DAY



LITTLE PLUMSTEAD'S STARFISH BOMBING DECOY

There were high priority targets for German attack in the local area. These included factories in nearby Norwich. Boulton & Paul at Riverside produced military aircraft, including the Defiant turret fighter and components for other RAF planes. Decoy sites were a crucial part of Britain's air defense strategy, designed to protect key urban and industrial areas from Luftwaffe bombing raids, particularly at night.

A Second World War 'Permanent Starfish' bombing decoy was constructed at Little Plumstead.

Laid out to mimic the lights of Norwich's industrial areas, the Starfish site aimed to create the illusion of a heavily bombed urban landscape, hoping to attract subsequent waves of bombers to drop their ordnance over the countryside instead of the real targets. Operational between 1941 and November 1943, the decoy initially functioned as a type C Starfish before a type QL was added in May 1943. The QL type specifically simulated the distinctive lighting associated with industrial activity. These sites were typically manned by RAF personnel who would ignite controlled fires and lighting arrays to enhance the deception during air raids.

The decoy airfield was indeed bombed during the war - which would have been audible and likely visible to local residents. Children also report exploring a mysterious bunker on the edge of the site.

COMMEMORATING VE DAY



TRAGEDY AT PLUMSTEAD GREEN

Unfortunately a bomb fell on a house on Plumstead Green, on 27th June 1942. Herbert Thirtle died in the blast. His wife Rose Thirtle was injured and died in the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital the same day. Both are buried at St Gervase and St Protase churchyard.

“Some houses belonging to Mr. Joe Wiley on the Green were hit by bombs and somebody was killed. I remember seeing the end walls blown out. The row of houses standing there today are the ones that replaced them.” - John Oakley

Source - <https://littleplumsteadmemories.wordpress.com/john-oakleys-memories/>



SUNSET IN LITTLE PLUMSTEAD

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LOCAL AIRBASES CHANGED THE LANDSCAPE FOREVER

Between 1942 and 1945, the county became home to a substantial number of personnel from the US Army Air Forces (USAAF), with approximately 50,000 stationed within a 30-mile radius of Norwich. Residents would have seen American Jeeps racing down nearby roads, witnessed huge planes roaring overhead, and heard unfamiliar accents in local pubs.

“(The Brick Kilns Pub) was a favorite place for the Americans from the Rackheath airbase. The US Military Police would be seen there at times with their truck to pick up any servicemen who got into a fight. Returning American servicemen’s bikes to the airfield main gate would get us comics or chewing gum. When you met an American airman you always asked “got any gum, chum?” and they most always gave you a packet.” - Bob Simmons

Rackheath airbase opened on 11th March 1943, and was named Station 145 by the USA Air Force. The 467th Bomb Group based here flew planes called Consolidated B-24 Liberators. You can see such a plane at Duxford Imperial War Museum. Rackheath airbase memorial is at the corner of Bidwell Road and Liberator Close. Several buildings still exist such as the control tower which is now an office.

“We kids would often go to the airfield to see the Liberator bombers stationed there. In particular there were two planes parked on the perimeter close by the Rackheath Road which were named “Bugs Bunny” and “Herbert Hare” and were quite accessible by climbing through the fence. I must confess to climbing into the belly of what was my favorite plane “Bugs Bunny” and pinching the empty cannon shell cases strewn on the plane’s floor after it had returned from a raid. I believe some of the the empty shell cases ended up being made into cigarette lighters.” - Bob Simmons

COMMEMORATING VE DAY



DAD'S ARMY

Dad's Army was the nickname for Britain's Home Guard, a volunteer defence force formed during World War II to protect the country in case of invasion.

"The Home Guard brought about a regular "event" in our house on a Sunday morning when father would get dressed up in his uniform to go for training. Getting him dressed was a bit of an adventure with him struggling into his overcoat. The job of us kids was to stand on the arm of a chair so we could reach and fasten up those little hooks below his chin as he in no way could ever hook them up himself. I don't know whether Hitler would have waited for him to get into his uniform had he invaded. His rifle was kept behind the front door curtain ready for action. They were only issued we believe with one clip of five bullets so he would have had to aim straight first time!

This brings to mind the events of the night when it was thought that a German invasion was on. Father, who worked at the Norwich Motor Company where they built parts for Churchill tanks and aircraft, was as usual late coming home after working long hours. So I guess he wasn't too impressed when some time after we were all in bed stones were thrown up at his bedroom window by the Home Guard. When he opened the window to see what was going on they shouted for him to get up as "Hitler was coming". Father's reply rolled out: "Let him bloody come - tell him I'll see him in the morning". It was a favorite tale mother often repeated. Sometimes on a Sunday morning we would go to the sand pit on Sandy Lane, just past the council houses but on the opposite side of the road, to look for rifle bullets after the Home Guard had been there for gun practice, although I can't remember finding many. After rifle practice they would head for the Brick Kilns. It was probably around 2 o'clock when father and the rest from our way in the village could be seen coming home down the road on those sit-up-and-beg bikes of the day." - Bob Simmons

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PLANE CRASHES

A British Blenheim bomber (L9183, 139 (Jamaica) Sqn RAF) took off from Horsham St Faiths (now Norwich Airport) at 18:35hrs for a Bombing mission to Ostende on Dec 23, 1940. At 19:59 on return it crashed in front of the Manor House, owned by Mr Joe and Mary Wiley, on 23 December 1940. Locals, home guard and constables including Clement Benns, Gerald Wiley (local special constable), and Herbert Brundish (air raid patrol), Benjamin Hardesty (local constable), Robert George and Charles Gunton rushed to assist the crew of the crashed and burning plane. These men were given Expressions of Commendation for Brave Conduct from King George VI. Sgt Nigel Clifford Ashley, pilot (20) (Coventry cemetery) pictured above, Sgt Alfred Robert Clarke (23) (Old Catton Cemetery), observer, were sadly killed in the crash. Sgt Alfred Edward Harrison, wireless operator and air gunner was injured and injured died 09/01/1941 age 20, and was buried Nottingham south cemetery.

A Wellington III BJ724 ("Despite The Elements" aircraft pictured below on mission) from 115 Sqn at RAF Marham crashed near Little Plumstead on 7th September 1942, killing four crew. It was returning from a mine-laying trip and operations to Duisburg, Germany and exploded and crashed when it's photo flash ignited. Canadian airforce members Sergeant L O Colbran (23), Sergeant M R Constable (below, standing) (24), Flight Sergeant C H Lanceley (below, profile) (22), Sergeant S W Scott (25) were all killed. All the dead are buried at Marham cemetery near Kings Lynn. Sergeant N C Hands was injured. After the crash, he made huge efforts to reunite Constable's family with a treasured watch from their relative. Later they tried to trace who had sent the watch. He lived to 90 years old, and met with the desendents of his friend later in his life, in a moving reunion.



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V2 ROCKET ATTACK - PERSONAL ACCOUNT

A V2 Rocket crashed into a field above Norwich Road, Little Plumstead on 17:44 on Thursday 5 October 1944. Luckily the site was a field, two fields behind Hewitt's Farm on the Norwich-Plumstead Road. It had been launched from Battery 444, Rijsterbos, Middenleane, in the Netherlands. Here's a personal account:

"I was standing by our shed door when we looked up to see an American bomber flying overhead. Then we saw what appeared to be something falling from the aircraft but it was in fact a V2 Rocket most likely meant for the USAF base at Rackeath. I remember my mother throwing me onto the shed floor as it exploded. It certainly made the biggest hole in the ground I had ever seen."

"Hewitt's farmhouse was only a short distance away and the blast blew all the windows out of the front of the house but didn't break any at the back, which was the side of the explosion. The woods up on the Plumstead Road near where the V2 landed was one of the places we used to play and that's where we found a part of the rocket which had many plastic wires attached. Once word got out it was taken away (after we had cut off some of the wires). There was also a cylinder with green smoke coming from it and this the army buried but we later found where that was - in the middle of the woodland near where the Highs lived - as the green smoke was still coming up out of the ground. Plastic-coated wire from such wartime finds was valuable to us kids for swapping as some of the girls used to make wrist bangles from it. Likewise we were happy to find any pieces of perspex from crashed aircraft windows which we would cut into shapes such as hearts and polish them up to trade with other kids for cigarette cards or comics." - Bob Simmons



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REMEMBERING THE LOCALS LOST IN THE WAR

The war memorial at St Gervase & St Protase, Little Plumstead, was updated after 1945 to include two WWII names:

Private **Ronald William Everson** was a builder's labourer and lived at 6 Council Houses, Sandy Lane, Great Plumstead, with parents John and Blanche and four younger siblings. He was part of the 4th battalion of the Royal Norfolk regiment and was sent to the far east. His battalion attempted to hold Singapore against the Japanese, but had to surrender when water and reinforcements ran out. Sadly he was sent to a forced labour camp in the North of Japan. He died 12/2/44 as a prisoner of war in POW Camp #13B Omi. This was on the site of Electro-chemical Industry Company in Omi-machi, Nishikubiki-gun, Niigata Prefecture. The camp was liberated in September 1945. He is buried in Yokohama war cemetery, Japan.

Sergeant **William George Gunton** was before the war a trainee brickmaker living with his family at Brickworks farm. He joined the RAF volunteer reserve and was allocated to the secretive RAF 161 squadron, died age 23 on 13/1/45 in a crash of a Catalina IVb flying boat (JX423) near Gibraltar, with all of his crewmates. He is commemorated at Runnymede memorial in Surrey, a memorial to lost forces who were never recovered. He was son of William Herbert Gunton and Mary Teresa Gunton, of Little Plumstead, Norfolk. He earned a distinguished flying cross.



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REMEMBERING THE LOCALS LOST IN THE WAR

Little Plumstead church has commonwealth war graves of two men,

Lance Corporal Clifford Colk fought with the Middlesex Regiment 1st Battalion, dying at age 21 on 28th June 1947 just after the war. Little is known about him. It has been challenging to find further information.

William Robert Symonds a Sargent in the Royal Air Force, died 7th June 1945 age 20. He was a bomb aimer based at the OTU 18 at Sleaford Airfield. His Vickers Wellington X (LP901) crash landed in Shropshire.



COMMEMORATING VE DAY



Great Plumstead's churchyard memorial likewise bears the names of two WWII personnel;

Richard Ernest Charles Bacon (RAF) was son of Ernest Frederick and Eva Florence Bacon, of Thorpe End, Norwich. Before the war he was a trainee sanitary inspector living with his mum, dad and two younger siblings. Dad worked for the council on juvenile welfare and was an ARP First Aider. He was a pilot at the 1658 Heavy Conversion Unit 4th bomber group at Ricall, North Yorkshire. He was asked to fly a cross country night flying exercise in extremely bad weather, on 23rd November 1943. During the flight, it's believed ice caused the break up of his Handley Page Halifax II which then crashed at Slipstone Crag, Colsterdale, North Yorkshire. The whole eight man crew were killed and Richard died age just 22. A small memorial and some aircraft parts can be found at the very remote crash site. Richard is buried at Harrogate cemetery.

Walter J. Whitmore (RN), son of market gardeners William and Bertha Whitmore of Low Road, Great Plumstead, was a petty officer in the Royal Navy, serving aboard HMS Scott. This was a halcyon class minesweeper. She measured depth of water with tidal fluctuations and currents to determine suitable minefield locations, and then surveyed for mulberry harbours and the pluto pipeline in preparation for the D Day invasion. Walter was part of the volunteer crew of one of the ship's motorboats. They put to sea during a gale to try to rescue three people who were adrift in a dory with a failed engine, and unfortunately all men drowned, Walter dying aged 25. He was buried at Boulogne Eastern Cemetery Pas de Calais on October 17 1944.



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VE DAY IN THE PLUMSTEADS AND NORWICH

“A picture very easy to recall is the night standing with John on our front lawn and seeing coloured vary light signal flares being sent up into the sky like fireworks by the American servicemen at Rackheath Airfield to mark the end of the war. Our village celebrations included a huge bonfire with an effigy of Hitler on top built in the meadow next to Charlie Williams’s house, which was on the left down Post Office Road just before the post office.

For me the end of the war came in with a bang as that was the first time I’d every seen or heard loud fireworks. Charlie Williams (he was a butcher in Norwich) had acquired these bangers called Little Demons and Cannons. When he arrived at the bonfire he had obviously been celebrating long before getting home and was in a rather “unsteady state” as he swung his car into the driveway, hit the gatepost and ripped its wing off. To add to my happiness a Spitfire or Hurricane flying overhead did a Victory Roll as it flew past.” - Bob Simmons



NORWICH VE DAY

