

MEMORIES OF OVERTON

Overton in War time

Preparation for War

The minutes of the Overton Parish Council August 1938 *"that 4 Air Raid Wardens were required for Overton... a notice be placed in the Post Office and the Council to choose the Wardens from volunteers"*

Memory of Den & Gerry Owen *"The 1930's, from the point of view of a youngster growing up in Overton, were sheer bliss. The sun seemed to shine endlessly in the summer and the winters were cold with lots of snow. Life rolled peacefully on without the interruptions of television or traffic or even telephones.*

When war broke out the effect on this idyllic life - even to us as young lads - was traumatic. We looked at the Daily Express every day, which published maps showing the line dividing the German and British positions. Each day the British line seemed to recede until it hit the coast and all was lost - that was Dunkirk.

Shortly after that there began to be major changes to the population of the village. The village's male population seemed to dwindle as men were called up, some tragically, never to return.

The second difference was a huge increase in the numbers of uniformed people we began to see around the village - there was an RAOC depot at Lightwood Green, Royal Artillery soldiers were billeted at Gwernhaylod House in Argoed Lane and their officers, with their horses, were in the "White Horse" which of course had the stables".

"We can remember filling sandbags to barricade the police station windows. All the kids were allocated this task and we went on Frank Lloyd's lorry down to the sand-hole at Home Farm to fill the bags."

In December 1939 the Overton Parish Council minutes report a committee was formed for the comforts of the troops. *"Mrs Thwaites explained that the various women's organisation in the village had got together to deal with the question of comforts. A room at Dr Casper's was available every Tuesday where members could meet to deal with the work. 60 garments were being knitted in one month, 19 were finished and already some had been sent to the troops."*

It was on August 21st 1940 that Lance Corporal Duncan Hannah of the Royal Artillery, who was stationed at Gwernhaylod whilst putting up black-out curtains and found a brooch lodged in crevice above a window. Thinking it may be valuable he handed it to the police. By 1942 the owner had not come forward and the police handed it to Major Hugh Peel, the owner of the house, who sold the brooch for £66. Lance Corporal Hannah then went to court to claim that he had found the brooch and it should be his. In 1945 the case reached the Kings Bench Division. The court ruled in favour of the soldier, Major Peel had to pay him the money he had sold the brooch for. This created a new precedent in law and a

peculiar way of acquiring title to property in the UK, which is also still used today and is also of relevance in US law. It is known as “Finders Keepers”

Home Guard

Local Defence Volunteers were formed in 1940 and their name was changed later that year to the Home Guard.

Zone 3 was the Nth Wales counties, Shropshire & Herefordshire.

Overton and the Maelor was organised by Sir Edward Hanmer (west of the Dee i.e. Erbistock was organised by Sir William Lowther)



Picture from left - Sir William Lowther, Mr Edward Benjamin (father of Wren Cecily Benjamin see P17) and Major Hugh Peel

Lt Col Sir Edward Hanmer had his **7th Denb/Flint Battalion Home Guard HQ** (by courtesy of Major Peel) in the Bryn y Pys estate office. This was also shared with the Overton post of the Observer Corp of which Eric Williams, Bryn y Pys estate agent was Chief Observer (*see notes on Overton Observer Corp on Page 13 or 'History in Pictures' web page*) – which led to an uneasy relationship reminiscent of “Dads Army” and Capt. Mainwaring's problems with the Church Hall!

By 1943 Battalion HQ was moved to “Fairleigh” on Station Road, home of Capt. Asterley (a Regular Officer), Sgt Major Brown lived at Overton Hall cottage, Willow Street.

The **Overton sector** was managed by Major Hugh Peel, then divided into area units which accorded to the civil parishes.

'A' Company 7th Denb/Flint Battalion Home Guard 1st company commander Major Guy Mostyn Owen of Penley Hall who had his HQ manned by 4 lady “Auxiliaries” at the back of The Quinta, School Lane, Overton. These were oisble ATS girls billeted at Bryn y Pys

There is on record dark hints about “deliberate poaching” on the part of Major Guy Mostyn Owen from Eric William's Observers.

'A' company was divided into Platoons, one of which was Overton

Den Owen's memory, *"that he and local lads used to be asked to hide and the Home Guard had to find them"*

Shooting competition between companies became annual display of marching and "assault-at-arms" competitions held in the grounds of Bryn-y -Pys. The military skills included tug-of-war, bomb throwing, platoon attack battle drill, section assault, wireless messages, stretcher bearer exercises, obstacle races in full kit. "A" Company remained at the bottom of the achievement league, showing talent only in bomb throwing and carrying stretchers.

The First Aid Point was at Overton Hall, home of Dr Casper.

Den Owen memory *"On Tuesday evenings when I had to go to the "local rooms" (the present Overton Library) where I was used as a patient for Dr Casper to demonstrate the art of putting on bandages to the first aid classes"*.

The Head **Air Raid Warden** for Overton was not on the phone *"In case of emergency and after the 'Warning Signal' the Overton Wardens Post will be the Telephone Kiosk, High Street Overton Telephone Number Overton 49"*.

The ARP Warden was Percy Richards of Church Road.

Gordon Richards memory *"This was a uniformed job – a dark blue serge battledress tunic and pants, overcoat and a 'tin hat' painted blue, emblazoned with the letters A R P in white. The helmet was similar to those issued to the military and I wore it every chance I got. There was one other piece of equipment he carried – a gas mask. Every man, woman and child was provided with a gas mask which had to be with you at **all** times. For civilians it was carried in a square cardboard box, but service personnel, including my Dad, had a more sophisticated model that was carried in a cylindrical tube or canvas satchel. I suppose that theirs was better than ours because they would be expected to work in more adverse conditions and levels of exposure. Thank God gas was never used by either side. His duties as a Warden entailed checking the blackout of the windows and doors of houses and also fire watching which, you will gather, required him to work a couple of nights a week. It was taken very seriously although it is doubtful if an enemy plane could have seen a chink of light from up above.*

Betty Williams remembers him checking bicycle lights.

Air Training Corps Mr Fred Freeman, Overton V P School headmaster was offered a commission as Pilot Officer by Ellesmere UDC worked with Flight 1195 ATC taking charge of Overton and Penley cadets in the Ellesmere Flight holding drills and parades once a week at Overton School.



The photo shows Overton and Ellesmere cadets of 1195 Flight ATC parade in 1941 along Scotland St, Ellesmere under the command of P/O J N Rushden

Den Owen's memory



"I lied about my age to join the Army Cadets. I was a Sergeant of 14 (really 13½)

I received a rifle - there really was a determination to "fight them on the beaches" if the worst came to the worst."

Bombing

From Wed 28th August 1940 for 4 successive nights there was bombing from Llangollen and along the west side of Wrexham as part of raids on Liverpool. On night of 29/30 August bombs fell on Halghton and Penley in a line from Althrey Hall at the racecourse to Halghton Hall via Adrafelin and Corner Farm Cloy.

Den Owen memory *"Mother took us and baby in the middle of the night to the farm situated where the school now is, since there was a cellar there. The farmer couldn't understand the panic but when a bomb exploded in Cloy Lane, the shock waves made him drop his pipe"*

Miss Owen's memories *"had to move out of our house in Little Green, Penley for 2 weeks after bomb damage. One fell behind the house and one in front"*

Gordon Richard's memory *"We did see squadrons of bombers - Junkers and Heinkels - flying high above the village at dusk on many evenings, on their way to bomb Liverpool. As it got dark, we could see the red glow in the sky, beyond the Welsh Hills, as the city burned. One bomb was dropped just outside the village but it landed harmlessly in a farmers pond – well, perhaps it killed a few water hens. On another occasion, a JU88 force landed in a field just outside the village and we kids were scrambling around hunting for souvenirs. Army guards kept us well away unfortunately, but I do recall some of the lads having bits of aluminium from the wings or whatever."*

In September 1940 parachutists were reported as landing in meadows north of Worthenbury, and in the vicinity of the Royal Ordnance Factory Isycoed.

"A" Company was called out and for the only time during the war operated as unit. Road blocks set up and hedge to hedge search carried out along the Dee (it was a false alarm)

Raymond Hinsley remembers that a Lockheed Lightning aircraft narrowly missed the school and crash landed in a field near Asney Lane.

December 1940 - Overton Parish Council minutes *"It was reported that complaints had been received about the stones in the cemetery not being camouflaged. It was resolved to appeal to owners of stones to cover their grave stones in view of the danger from enemy action"*.

January 1941 Overton RDC supplied stirrup pumps for fire fighting, one per 20 households. Families were encouraged to buy their own at 5 shillings a pump.

From January 1941 Overton, Bangor & Penley platoons had the responsibility for patrolling the Wrexham-Ellesmere railway line, now dedicated solely to munitions and supply trains to and from the Royal Ordnance Factory at Isycoed.

There were various **Savings Campaigns**, "Wings for Victory" and "Salute the Soldier" parades and regular dances held at Overton Village Hall to raise funds for the Home Guard and Cadet Forces. Overton Parish Council minutes August 1943 *"Mr Freeman asked the Council to support the 'Wings for Victory' campaign in June. The target for Overton is £6,500"*

The Battalion paraded Sunday 16 May 1943 on "Home Guard Sunday". 'A' & 'B' Companies gave a demonstration and exercise at Bryn y Pys Saturday 26 June 6pm 433 servicemen and women headed by RAF band paraded through Overton.



Salute the Soldier march past in 1942

'Salute the Soldier' Week was a fund raising scheme to encourage civilians to save their money in Government accounts, such as War Bonds, Savings Bonds, Defence Bonds and Savings Certificates. The photograph show Penley Guides led by Miss Margaret Owen (*Joan Davies, daughter of Jack Davies, butcher Salop Rd, front left. Special constable son pavement*)

As the threat of invasion increased the Home Guard set up 'nodal points' or defensive positions to delay and obstruct enemy advance. In Overton the 'nodal point' was the High Street with a 'last redoubt' set up in the grounds of Bryn y Pys estate office (*now Peel Close*) where sunken air raid shelters doubled as 'A' company armoury and stores.

The infiltration and capture of Overton High Street was the regular objective of mock exercises with regular units stationed locally, such as the Irish Guards and the Lancashire Fusiliers. The Home Guard usually did well in these exercises as they had local knowledge and access to back gardens etc.

March 1943 Overton Parish Council minutes report that "*nuisances were being committed in the streets*" and March 1944 that "*It was resolved that a Public Convenience was very necessary for the village of Overton.*"

1944 The Americans arrive

Gordon Richards memory "*In 1944, prior to and in readiness for D-Day - the Allied landings on the beaches of continental Europe - a military establishment was built in the nearby village of Penley and American troops were encamped there, and on the land surrounding the manor house of Bryn-y-Pys in Overton. Prior to the arrival of the Americans, the park had been dotted with sweet chestnut trees which provided us with a wonderful harvest in the autumn but most of these were felled to facilitate the buildings on the camp. They were never replanted.*

I have mentioned that American troops were billeted in the park surrounding the manor house in the weeks preceding D-Day landings. (Believed to be the fields to the east of the present Bryn y Pys stables) There were literally thousands of them in tented accommodation and they were confined to camp, I guess so their

presence would not become common knowledge and maybe passed to the enemy. Anyway, they were like caged bears with nothing to do but play baseball and softball, bored out of their skulls and no doubt anxious to connect with the local girls, however, fraternisation was OUT.

We kids would talk to them over the fence, fetch them fish and chips, get beer for them (illegally) from the pubs and anything else they wanted (within reason), in return for packs of 200 cigarettes, packs of gum – which we were always begging from them, “got any gum chum” was a cry that was echoed throughout the land. Ten bob (ten shillings/50p) was a fortune and they didn’t know the value of the pound (nor did we tell them) and they had nothing much to spend it on in their camp, so it was fair compensation for trips to the pub or whatever.

They were halcyon days for us, but many of those poor soldiers became casualties on the beaches of Normandy and some, who survived the onslaught, may have found their way to the hospital at Penley days after the landings.

After the Americans left, the camp was used to house Italian prisoners of war. . They wore a brown uniform of sorts with yellow diamond flashes and to begin with they were escorted to their work on farms but as the war progressed, they were given bikes and allowed to cycle to work. We would see them riding their bikes daily through the village on their way to work on nearby farms. As far as I can recollect, they never caused any problems. We learned a few Italian profanities – which I shall not go into – which we used to shout at them as they rode by and then, as they stopped as if to give chase, we were off like long dogs. We were SO brave!!

The park had a variety of uses for, after the Italians left, the army moved in to create a rifle range and that gave us another outlet, this time collecting the spent bullets behind the targets that were buried in the butts and also the shell cases. They became yet another swap item and we would throw live rounds and attack them with a hammer, without fear. We were stupid, no change that to ignorant, because we were not aware of the danger we were exposing ourselves and others to. These were exciting days, never-the-less and provided adventures for our inquisitive minds.

Sunday 3 December 1944 the 7th Den / Flint Battalion Home Guard paraded for the ONLY time after a short service in Overton Parish Church conducted by Rev Silian Jones and an address by Rev N S Baden-Powell vicar of Rhosymedre, hon. Chaplain to the Battalion west of the Dee, 450 officers and men headed by Ifton Colliery Band marched past their Commanding Officer and RDC dignitaries. Lt Col Sir Edward Hanmer addressed the men and took the salute.



Officers of the 7 Den / Flints Battalion Home Guard at Bettisfield Park April 1911.
Home of Lt Col Edward Hanmer
Centre front row: Lt Col Edward Hanmer, 2 to the right of him Capt Asterley of Fairleigh, Station Rd, Overton

The Home Guard was not officially disbanded till 31st December, 1945.

Evacuation

Overton Parish Council minutes July 1939 called a meeting to “*appoint a reception committee in connection with the Government Evacuation Scheme*” and Billeting Officers was appointed for Knolton, Lightwood Green, Cloy, Argoed, Overton Bridge and the Village

There were 2 types of evacuees in Overton

- the “official” evacuees from the Merseyside area,
- and those people in Overton who had relations in other parts of the country who came to live with them during the war.

It appears that evacuees from Merseyside were mostly mothers and young children, which did not make a great impact on Overton School. Evacuation began in 1939 but many quickly returned to their homes, finding the countryside “boring”. This meant that many returned to their homes before the bombing of Liverpool at the end of August 1940.

Margaret Evison nee Phillips lived as a child during the war at 2 Tanners Row and had 3 cousins living with them whose home was Ramsgate, plus for a short time her Gran who lived in Bromley, Kent. She says their home was called an ‘elastic house’.

Mr Freeman, headmaster of Overton school sent out ‘Air Raid Notes’, that if there was an air raid during school hours each child should run home, and if they lived out of the village they should have a house in the village to run to. There were practises of this, enjoyed by all. Other teachers were Mrs Stansfield, and Miss Owen who taught the Infants.

Land Army



Queensbridge Hall was a hostel and training centre for the Land Army girls, about 50 at a time.

Back Row 1st left Marjorie Kidd; 3rd from right Barbara Thelwell; 2nd Row from Back - from left 1st Mary Peterson; 2nd Cynthia Scott; 4th Betty Heath.

Memories of Barbara Thelwell, Cynthia Scott, Mary Peterson, Marjorie Kidd and Betty Heath *“Dances were held twice a week at Overton Village Hall with Dick Cross and his band. The band knew when the land girls had to leave and they would play ‘Give Us Five Minutes More’ by Jimmy Young. Girls had to be back at Queensbridge hostel by 10.30pm or else they were locked out - the warden rang a bell three times and that was it: door shut. Wardens were Mrs Watson, (very strict), then Miss Owen who was one of us, and then Mrs. Barmforth who was a cross between Margaret Rutherford and Hattie Jacques. When boyfriends called at Queensbridge, they were allowed only at the bottom of the stairs where they would call your name, or they could wait in the lounge which consisted of lots of chairs, a couple of tables and a piano, which a few of the girls used to play. Social life was very mundane; groups of girls, with or without boyfriends, would gather at the Overton Cocoa Rooms in front of a blazing fire in winter eating sandwiches (beetroot or jam) and drinking tea and just sitting.*

Memory of Mary Ethel Fleming *“I was stationed at Overton on Dee, Queensbridge Hostel, North Wales, 1945, I did general farm work, thrashing, apple picking, collecting eggs and potato picking, stooping the corn. We had to do the work as the men were away. 50 land girls where stationed there, I remember Meridith, Margaret Nickelson became my best friend and she came to stay with me in Blackburn when we were on leave and I stayed at hers in Lancaster.”*



The land girls at Queensbridge in 1947 - Ella Evans (nee Kimball) is in the middle of the back row with Lilian Earshaw (left) and Enid Williams. At the front are Joan Bradley and Morfydd Edwards

Entertainment Memories

The Village Hall was in constant use.



The Savana Dance Band, with Dick Cross on drums, Jan Zamojski on trumpet, Percy Rogers on saxophone, Kath Hamlington on piano accordion and Gwen Dalby née Davies on piano.

Films were shown several times a week. The projectionist was Mr Jenkins and Edna Davies was the usherette. Tickets cost 1/9d in the balcony and 1/- or 9d in the stalls. There were always queues for the cinema.

Food memories

The Chapel School Room on the corner of Station Road was the local Food Office, open one day a week. It issued and replaced Ration Books and investigated the black market. It also issued permits for the butchers and the grocers, and sold baby food, powdered milk for babies, cod liver oil and orange juice plus vitamin tablets for expectant mums

The end of the War

Mary Casper's memories from her diary, (daughter of Dr Casper of Overton Hall)

"Mary Hilton-Jones was my oldest and best friend. Her only brother Hanmer had been a prisoner for 3 years and he was expected home soon

April 16th 1945 Mary and I painted a Welcome Home banner after tea in the garden. Supper at the Hilton Jones's. The 9.00pm news said that Stalag XIB Hanmer's POW camp has been liberated at Fallingbostenel

April 23rd Woken by a phone call to say Hanmer is at Cosford RAF military hospital.

April 24th Dad had a telephone call from Hanmer to say he had impetigo but otherwise well.. The Hilton-Jones's do not have a telephone so we are their point of contact as dad is the GP. Mum H-J truly delighted by the news.

April 27th. Set off to Cosford with impetigo cream and a lot of magazines. Hanmer came down corridor laughing in hospital blues with bandages on hands and face but looking well but very thin. Returned 3.30 to station took ages to get home. Very happy party and Hanmer's mum overjoyed.

May 2nd News of Hitler's death – don't know if one can believe it.

May 6th Up at 8.30 & went to H.J's for breakfast. Excitement rife. Did flags on house, decorated car & changed. Daddy, Mary & I went to Ruabon & picked up Hanmer. A good few flags in the village."

Overton Parish Council minutes August 1945 a meeting was called "to discuss ways and means of celebrating the end of the war ... and to fully consider the question of the Victory Celebrations and to raise funds therfor"

Welcome Home Party in the Village Hall





Overton People in Wartime

Tom Haynes 1918 - 2004



Photo taken in 1939

Tom served with the 1st Battalion Kings Shropshire Light Infantry and served in North Africa with the desert campaign, and later in Italy where he took part in the landings at Anzio beachhead.

He rescued two soldiers that had become stranded in the middle of a minefield, carrying them, one at a time to safety. For this act of bravery he was awarded the Military Medal

Miss Evelyn Wybergh



"Age?" asked the records officer when Private Evelyn Wybergh joined the ATS. "Fifty-five," she said, and stared him to say "Aye, and more." She may claim to be the oldest ATS, but she keeps her secret.

In 1939 Miss Wybergh of Argoed Lane (but previously of Overton Hall) joined the ATS -at the age of 69 - but saying she was 55!. She was the oldest serving member in the country.

From the 1945 newspaper account -

"Private Evelyn Wybergh was as wiry as a whippet and right on top of her job. It baffles her that people should regard it as an achievement to be holding her own with girls who are only a third of her age. The thing that puzzles the ATS is how they came to turn her down as "too old" when she first tried to join up 5½ years ago. "Age?" asked the officer when she made her second attempt a few months after the war began. "Fifty five" she said, looking him straight in the eye - and was square bashing in no time.

This is the second time she has been to war. Every day during WWI she rode horse-back to a munition factory in Ruabon, 4 miles way to work for her country. The old lady in khaki pedalling away on her bicycle is one of the thrills of the neighbourhood"

Private Evelyn Wybergh, W/12102 Women's' Auxiliary Service, was awarded the British Empire Medal in the New Year Honours of 1945. She was aged 75.

Cecily M Bruce Benjamin



The Benjamin family lived at Pendyffryn, Salop Road, Overton. Cecily joined the Wrens and was based at H.M.S. President 11, a shore base for accounting purposes at Lower Regent Street, London. She was made a Chief Wren and was one of 22 members of W.R.N.S. (Womens Royal Naval Service) who volunteered for cipher and wireless duties in Gibraltar. They embarked from Liverpool en route to Gibraltar on 12th August 1941 on board the S.S. "Aguila", Commodore ship of Convoy OG-71. The Convoy was attacked by

German Submarines on 19th August, while off the south west coast of Ireland. Soon after midnight a torpedo hit the "Aguila" amidships sending her to the bottom in 90 seconds. There were only 16 survivors, leaving a death toll of 145. Not one of the 22 Wrens survived. She was 20 years old.

(See British Legion Page on Overton Website for full account)

Norman H Bolland

Son of Charles and Beatrice Bolland, Poethlyn Terrace, Overton. Aged 19, Fusilier. Royal Welsh Fusiliers. 7th Bn. Died: 14th April 1945. Died from shrapnel wounds. Buried in Germany at Becklingen. The site of Becklingen War Cemetery in the North of Germany was chosen for its position on a hillside which overlooks Luneburg Heath, where Field-Marshal Montgomery accepted the German surrender from Admiral Doenitz on 4 May 1945

Reginald Hillman

Salop Road, Overton. Aged 23. Guardsman. 4th Btn Grenadier Guards. Died: 14th August 1944. Killed at the battle of the Falaise Pocket, fought during the Second World War from 12–21 August 1944, which was the decisive engagement of the Battle of Normandy. He is buried at Bayeux, France

George Lindsay

High Street, Overton. Aged 43. Flight lieutenant. RAF Voluntary Reserve. Died: 29th June 1944. No known grave but his name is on The Air Forces Memorial at Runnymede which commemorates the names of over 20,000 airmen who were lost in the Second World War during operations from bases in the United Kingdom and North and Western Europe, and who have no known graves. He was mentioned in Despatches

John Winston Pearson

Maesgwaylod. LAC. RAF. Died of Pneumonia.

Lieut. Hugh William Jardine Ethelston Peel, grandson of Major Peel

Bryn y Pys, Overton. Died age 25.

Armed Reconnaissance Battalion, Welsh Guards

Died: 17th February 1945. Killed Netherlands. Awarded the Croix de Guerre.

On the 3 September 1944 at 7am the Welsh guards liberated Brussels. The 1st and 2nd Battalion's moved on to Nijmegen and suffered a lot of casualties mainly of the 1st Battalion, then 20 miles south to Veulen. There remained to be cleared the Rhineland territory lying south of Nijmegen; as the Welsh Guards entered there had been heavy fighting. The 2nd Battalion Welsh Guards had been split up to support different Regiments. On the 16 February Number One Squadron

was ordered to support the Coldstream Guards at Mull, the tanks got bogged in one by one. Lieut. Peel is buried in Uden War Cemetery, Netherlands.

Other sources: Commonwealth War Graves Commission
"A Millennium History of Penley" by Shirley & Derrick Pratt