

WARTIME MEMORIES OF ELVINGTON

Recorded by Rev. Leonard Rivett

Rev Leonard Rivett, one of the founding members of the Yorkshire Air Museum, Rector of Elvington and later honorary chaplain of the Museum, collected many stories from Elvington residents and the following come from his collection. He was in 13 Squadron during the war flying patrols against U-boats and escorting convoys in preparation for the invasion of Sicily and Italy. Leonard died in 1984.

Mrs Freke remembers that the York to Elvington bus was always full of airmen. The RAF had come to the village in 1942 to open RAF Elvington. The locals gave the airmen hospitality in the evenings. Her daughter married a pilot, Flt Lt Beadle, in 1947. He went to Malta and stayed in the RAF after the war. He taught at RAF Leeming as a civilian.

Tea used to come to the Derwent Valley Light Railway in chests and was sampled in the warehouse where she worked. She remembers counting the aircraft out and back in. They could hear the tannoy announcements. There were 'all family' dances in the Social Hut and by invitation at the RAF station once a month. A swarm of bees was rescued by the Rector, Rev Jackson. They had apparently been to Berlin and back in an aircraft!

Jean Rudka was the daughter of Harold Handley, the station master of the Derwent Valley Light Railway which the RAF used during the war. In fact there was a passenger service to Elvington and later a freight service right to 1973. It ran from Layerthorpe in York, to Selby, stopping at Elvington. Jean was born at the station and remembers convoys of lorries stretching along York Road to Jaques garage for petrol. Old clothes were used as fertilisers and she and her friends would collect buttons from the bottom of the wagons. Jean married John Rudka, who came to Elvington in 1950 as a displaced person. He was born in the Ukraine. He went first to a transit camp at Full Sutton. Then he was sent to the ex POW camp at Storwood. They moved to Melbourne and then back to Elvington in 1956.

Mrs Firth of Sutton on Derwent wanted to join the WAAFS but did not qualify by age so instead she joined the NAAFI, becoming a mobile canteen driver. She was posted to Elvington. The canteen was actually independent and had its own manager, but they got supplies from the NAAFI. She spent one night in the NAAFI quarters but the rats came and ate her chocolate so she went to lodge with Arthur and Florence Atkinson. The canteen sold tea, buns and scones. She drove round the dispersal points morning and afternoon. Often in the morning she sadly found that aircraft were missing. She went to Lincoln temporarily then returned and joined the Land Army where she did everything but plough.

Mrs Holland also worked in the canteen. Workmen from Walker and Slater came. Billy cans were hung from her bicycle handlebars to take tea to men on the work sites. It cost 2d a mug with milk and sugar. They also sold cigarettes. The hut had a concrete floor and no heating. Lunch was cooked on a coal boiler and oven and cost 2/6d. She took in wives of soldiers from the Tank Corps and then airmen. The wives worked in aircraft factories like De Havilland. One pilot from 77 Squadron and his wife lived with them. One Friday the chaplain came up the path at 8am to say that the pilot was missing, and she had to wake his wife up to tell her.

A 12 year old boy was billeted on her and her two year old daughter. He came for a short time but he stayed until he was 21. He had St Vitus Dance and she bought him the game of draughts to help him concentrate. His sister also came to stay for a while and was nursed through pneumonia. Mrs H had tried to join the Observer Corps in York but was turned down as she had a young child.

After the RAF took over the airfield, eight local women served about 50 men a day in the small hut out at the bomb dump near the hangar. They served potatoes, carrots, sausages, liver, mince and dried eggs were used for puddings. Most of the airmen had bicycles and would ride into York although there were buses, or they would walk down into Elvington. They mixed with the villagers and there were dances. There were some at Sutton Hall. There were also whist drives and a cinema.

Nora Shingles became post mistress in 1940. She took on the job for a fortnight and stayed for 32½ years. Mrs Sellars at Elvington Post Office was in charge. Nora left home at 5am and started at 5.30. She sorted and delivered mail to all the local villages and farms. The Sutton postman did the afternoons. She finished there at 9.45am and went to work at Minnie Shaw's until 5pm.

The post office was open six days and at Christmas there were two deliveries for which she got overtime. Her wage was 7/6d a week. Later on she got 2/6d a week cycle allowance. She got a Post Office bike with a front basket and bags on the back. It had a carbine lamp on the front and an oil lamp at the back. In wartime she had a battery lamp clipped onto her uniform. There were RAF living quarters behind Aysgarth Terrace. Later she would deliver to the RAF Orderly office and WAAF sites. She had a tin helmet with Post Office on the front. She delivered registered letters with weekly pay packets to the labourers. Some airmen came to the house in the evenings to play cards.

Minnie Shaw lived at Scotch Farm but they moved to Belvoir Farm where none of the land had been requisitioned. Scotch Farm and another had been taken over by the Air Ministry (a copy of the order is in the YAM archives). The trees were felled and the house and farm buildings demolished as they were on the crossing of the proposed runways. Minnie used to watch the aircraft and once saw an enemy one over the airfield, and heard machine guns. There was a bus along the Hull Road and as the aircraft came over a farm, her brother dived into the hedge. The aircraft was shot down near Brighton and the crew taken prisoner. She remembers the German aircraft crashing into Dunnington and one of the crew sitting beside the road. He was taken prisoner.

Renee Shaw joined as a woman driver. They used their own cars at first and then drove Dodge trucks. They took stone from Stonefall Quarries, Knaresborough, in convoy for the foundation of Nissen huts. The Air Ministry initially rented Scotch Farm then bought it, and then in 1945 offered it back to Mr Shaw at the 1939 valuation.

Harry Footitt worked at McNeil's and then on the airfield and cycled to Full Sutton for a 6am shift. He was a gardener but was not called up as he had a bad heart. His wife had a 'back door shop' selling cigarettes etc, so was asked to start a canteen in the village hall.

Pauline Corney remembers dances at the Old Mill, Sutton before the war and at Elvington Institute and Sutton Village Hall during the war.

Kay Watkinson was in the WAAFS as a Corporal. 180 WAAFS were moved from Elvington RAF station when the French came. The WAAFS had been cooks, admin clerks, sick bay attendants and aircraft hands (mechanics). Her husband Tom was in the RAF police. Kay was on the staff at Heslington Hall, the HQ of 4 Group, on six months temporary duty at Elvington.

Hubert Jefferson recalls that Elvington had a population of 400, then in September 1939, some 40 evacuees arrived. The Royal Tank Regiment was there before the RAF. One soldier was on guard at York railway station, and fell onto the line. He pushed a 10 ton wagon over and lost one and a half fingers so got discharged. The Social Room, a YMCA hut from the First World War, was taken over by the army for a cookhouse. The local people knew that war was imminent and so they were prepared. The railway station got busier. Hubert's grandfather supplied groceries for the works canteen.

George Simpson had a fish and chip shop in Church Lane, also selling sausages, eggs and scallops. The counter was in their front room. He was a blacksmith and worked for his father at Newton on Derwent. The shop was the second fish and chip shop in Elvington. Chips and a bottle of pop cost 6d, with 1d back on the bottle. They opened three evenings a week and Saturday lunchtime. They used oil and acetylene lamps. The fish came on the bone from Hull and King Edward potatoes were available locally. They had an ice box. The bones and skin were boiled for pig feed in the back yard. The shop became too much and they closed it.

After Dunkirk 14 soldiers were billeted on them. They were paid 2d a night for each and were later provided with mattresses and blankets. One soldier drowned while swimming in the Derwent upstream from the bridge.

RAF wives would come and stay for weekends. Mr Simpson reopened the fish and chip shop in 1946, and also had a taxi and took churns of milk from local farms to Northern Dairies.