



Podcast by
Windsor & Royal Borough Museum

VE Day in the Royal Borough – 75 years on

Becky: Welcome to Windsor and Royal Borough Museum's podcast to mark the 75th anniversary of Victory in Europe Day. We will be talking to special guests and sharing clips from our oral history collection to help us reflect on what the home front experience was like in the local area, and also to think about what the Second World War meant, and still means, to residents in the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead.

On the evening of the 7th of May 1945, news reached Britain that at 2:41am that morning the German armed forces had surrendered unconditionally.

The act of military surrender stated 'We the undersigned, acting by authority of the German High Command, hereby surrender unconditionally to the Supreme Commander, Allied Expeditionary Force and simultaneously to the Supreme High Command of the Red Army all forces on land, at sea, and in the air who are at this date under German control'.

The war in Europe would officially end at midnight the next day and the ceasefire had already begun. Britain rejoiced and prepared for a national holiday. The next day would see people dancing and singing in the streets, strangers embracing, bells ringing out, flags waving and bonfires being lit. Huge numbers descended on the Mall to celebrate and get a glimpse of the Royal family on the balcony of Buckingham Palace. By midnight, an estimated 50,000 people were crowded around Piccadilly Circus. This is the story of VE day that we are all so familiar with.

But intimately entwined with the tales of jubilation is also the story of one Windsorian. Because those words that I read to you a moment



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ago, the words that comprised the act of military surrender, were written by John Counsell, the manager of the Theatre Royal in Windsor, from 1933 until 1985.

It seems an unlikely tale, but it was John's talents as a writer that led to him sitting in a room in May 1945 under top-secret conditions writing the six clauses to which Nazi Germany would surrender, and with only an hour and a half to do so.

John had left Windsor to join the British army in 1940 and quickly rose to the ranks of Colonel and began ghost writing official reports for Allied Commander General Eisenhower. Though, I am sure he never imagined that he would be the one to write the document that would finally end the horror that had descended over Europe for the past five years.

In his hometown, his wife and children could barely imagine the crucial role their husband and father had just played in ending the war. But all around them were the celebrations of VE day. In the morning, the occasion was marked by church services which gave thanks for victory, followed by the ringing of church bells. Many street parties then followed with mass sing-a-longs and games aplenty. In the Windsor & Royal Borough Museum collection there is a wonderful photo of a party taking place on Alma Road, Windsor outside the childhood home of another prominent Windsor resident, Sir Sydney Camm, the designer of the Hurricane fighter plane. In the evening, the crowds swelled and there was a huge bonfire lit on Bachelors Acre. Windsor riverside was decorated with fairy lights, and flags and bunting lined the streets. By midnight, many of the local pubs had run out of alcohol but the partying continued until the early hours. Similar scenes also unfolded in Maidenhead, Eton and the other towns and villages that now comprise the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead.



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Because, for so many in Britain, VE day was a celebration. Tyranny had been defeated, many would be reunited with loved ones and they would no longer live in fear of air raid sirens and the eerie hum of a V1 rocket. But the war raged on in the Far East and Pacific, and not all continuing to fight on the battlefronts would make a safe return. After the dancing and singing came reflection, on what had been lost and ruined, and on how the country would rebuild. It was a time of mixed emotions and so in 2020, as we mark 75 years since VE day and remember the important role a Windsorian played in the final hours before surrender, it is also just as important that we reflect on the varying ways in which individuals connected to the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead experienced the Second World War.

As soon as war was declared on 3 September 1939, the lives of individuals living in the Borough changed rapidly and in numerous ways. Men aged 18 to 41 were conscripted into the armed forces, but as they left, others were arriving in town. Between 1st and 3rd of September 1939, 1.5 million children were evacuated in Britain. In this first wave alone, 6,000 arrived in Maidenhead, and around 8,000 arrived in the Windsor and Slough area in the first year.

Doreen Crowhurst was evacuated from London's East End to Windsor in 1939. Like many evacuees, she travelled with her school friends and they were accompanied by their schoolteacher from home.

Interviewer: Could you tell us about the day you left London to arrive in Windsor?

Doreen: We got up very early because we had to be at the school by 9:00 o'clock. We had to take packed sandwiches with us and a change of underclothes and night clothes. Being from a very poor family we didn't own a suitcase, so everything was put into a pillowcase and we had a gas mask with us. My Dad went to work and



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couldn't come. My sister was crying too much to come so it was my Mum and my big brother who was 21. We got to the school and had a roll call. There must have been about 300 of us and as the buses pulled up, big red double Decker buses, some kids had never been on a bus before. I was lucky I had. Everyone was crying, mums, dads, kids, everyone and we boarded the buses and we drove to Bromley-by-Bow station which was partly on top and partly underground which was very frightening at the time. We went as far as Richmond station. We all got out, went to the toilet and had a drink. Back on the train the teacher said 'would you like to go to strawberry Hill or Windsor'. Everybody said Strawberry Hill but we ended up in Windsor. When we arrived at the station, there were boy scouts waiting for us with little paper carrier bags in which we had barley sugar biscuits and a few sweets. We then walked up Castle Hill through into the Acre and in Bachelors Acre we went into the Royal Free School. When we arrived there we were given a postcard to say 'we have arrived in Windsor' as our parents had no idea where we were going. We were then walked down to Peascod Street and through a little alleyway which was King Edward School in those days and is now shops. There were three rows of terraced houses, Edward Square, Denmark Street and Goswell Road. We were all stood in the middle of the road and people who wanted to take in a child had a number card in the window of how many children they could take. This lady came up to my cousin who was supposed to be looking after me, 'I'll have this little girl' she said because she's 13 and can sleep with my daughter. My cousin then said 'no I've got to take care of Doreen' so the billeting officer said well Doreen can stay here for one or two nights, we'll send round a camp bed and a blanket. So we went into the house and the first thing we were told to have, go to the toilet which was outside, wash our hands and have our sandwiches, which by this time were very dry. She said you can put your sandwiches in the pig bin and I



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thought 'Oh how lovely, they've got pigs in the garden'. Unfortunately, it was just a bin to collect the food. We had some fresh sandwiches and I was told to call the lady Aunt Maud and the man Uncle George. When the daughter came in from work who was 16, she took me on the ferry over to the Brocas and we went to the fairground. Everything was lovely until it was bedtime. Straight away I wanted my mum. We all did. They had no gas lights upstairs, just a candle and it was flickering, and it was very very frightening, and the rain was coming in through the ceiling so we had a raincoat on the bed. Mrs Allen came upstairs, 'if I give you a penny will you stop crying'. 'No I want my mum' and we did, we desperately wanted our mums, but we eventually went to sleep and the next morning we had to go to St Stephens church where Father Heald told us war had been declared and we ran back to the billet and Mr Allen made us put on our gas mask and sat us in the coal shed.

Interviewer: So is Mr Allen is Uncle George isn't he and Mrs Allen is Aunt Maud? So what was it like in the coal shed?

Doreen: The coal shed was very funny when I look back now. It was in the house, under the stairs. That's where the coal was tipped, and we sat in there with our gas masks on until the all clear went.

Becky: Offering an alternative perspective on wartime evacuation, June Rainer recalls what it was like to be a child and have evacuated children come to live in your family home. June lived with her parents in Windsor.

June: I can remember in the war, changing the subject again, saying back about Holy Trinity School we came to, when the war was on we had a lot of evacuees come down from Poplar and all the people in South Place, the majority of us, we had to take people in. Now we only had two bedrooms but I can always remember, my mum put a curtain across her bedroom so that my sister and I could share the



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bedroom with my mum and dad and then my mum could let, I suppose you call them evacuees, that came down from London, they used to have the other room and there was quite a lot of them so you all had to make room for the people, poor people coming down from Poplar and London all around that were getting bombed out.

Becky: In the Windsor & Royal Borough Museum oral history collection there are many accounts of what it was like to be a child living through the Second World War, both in the Borough and further afield. They offer fascinating insights into how children interpreted the chaos unfolding around them, often forming innocent and naive interpretations of events. Additionally, some of the events from the time that made the greatest impression on children, and stayed with them into adulthood, are not necessarily what we might expect.

Becky: Tony Messenger recalls what the war meant to him as a child.

Tony: I remember the war quite clearly and I remember awful stories of terrible ships being sunk and men being killed and what have you but I have certain things that I remember so vividly. We used to be taken up to what is now the Cavalry exercise ground in the Great Park and there was a firing range there and at my tender age of probably about 3, I thought that seeing the soldiers lying down firing into the sandbags at the other end, that's where I thought the war was going on. I remember my mother telling me that the war was over and everybody was happy and everybody was kissing everybody and everyone was dancing in the streets and so on but I burst into tears because I rather liked going up to watch these soldiers in the Cavalry exercise ground shooting and I thought it was rather fun and I thought I wouldn't go and see my war anymore and that was the end of my war.

Becky: Dr Brigitte Mitchel moved to live in Windsor from Germany in 1959. As a child she recalls seeing a Hurricane over the Ruhr.



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Interviewer: Brigitte, you have a particular wartime memory that you would like to talk about?

Brigitte: Yes when I was about just four years old, right at the end of the war, we were aware that the Allied troops were marching in and where we lived on top of the Hill overlooking the Ruhr you could look down into the Valley and actually see the troops and my mother and the older siblings had gone down there. I was on my own sitting on the swing at the back of the house and our maid was in the house with the baby and I heard at first an aircraft approaching and I kind of looked up and I saw very very close at an angle, a small aircraft flying. I could see the pilot with his laser helmet or cap and I thought he hadn't done up his chin straps because they were hanging down by the side of his face. I later on discovered that's what they looked like and I saw this man in the aircraft and I was frantically waving at him. I wanted him to notice me and he didn't. He was just too intent on what he was doing and a little while later I could hear, I don't know if it was the same or another aircraft approaching, and at that moment our maid had realised what was going on outside and she came out and dragged me off the swing and we rushed into a little Woodland that we had the other side of the house and there we had a dugout and I was most incensed.

Interviewer: And this was part of the Allied advance into Europe?

Brigitte: Yes, the Allies had crossed the Rhine and they were going through the Ruhr marching towards Berlin and it would have been in late April 1945.

Interviewer: Right and what age were you then?

Brigitte: I was four and two months.

Interviewer: What feeling did you have seeing this Allied plane?



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Brigitte: I was delighted. I only remember as a child 'oh there's an aircraft'. I'd never seen one close up like that. We'd watch the aircraft coming in over the Dutch border on bombing raids but we'd never been made, my mother never sort of worried us about it. We never got any fear translated from our parents about what was going on. It was very positive and tried to keep us cheerful, so I wasn't worried at all. I was just annoyed that the pilot didn't wave back.

Becky: Of course, some children's experience of the war was traumatising and for that reason stayed with them into adulthood.

Frances Rye moved to Windsor in the 1950s but experienced the war as a child in France. She was born in London in the 1930s and moved to live with her French Grandmother in 1936.

Frances: And then so I went to a French school, you know, and I was brought up like a French girl and then in 1940, that's right about just over a year after the Germans invaded, they went to the Town Hall where we lived which was a little town near Brest, right opposite the U-boat base and they asked if there were any foreigners, especially English people living in the town and the Mayor said 'no no no there's no foreigners here' cause he knew me and he knew my Uncle you see but a little Clark who lived in our road piped up and said 'Oh yes the little English girl who lives in Bellevue, so of course they said 'who's that' and of course they had to give them my details, my name, where I lived and everything and a few days after that, I don't know how long because we didn't know about this visit to the Town Hall by the Germans, there was a knock at the door and it was on the Tuesday I think. I was getting ready to go to school and there was a knock at the door at half seven in the morning and in walked an officer and two Germans armed, looking for the English girl [laughs] So that was me and I was seven and a quarter, 7 and 4 months. Anyway, my Aunt got up. The whole house was upside down.



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Everyone was screaming and my Aunt tried to find my passport which she did and of course my passport only proved that I was British so my Aunt tried to tell them well you can't take her she's too small and they said 'Oh, well if she had been under 7 we would have left her but she's just over 7, she's 7 and 4 months, so we have to take her'. So anyway I created such a Ding Dong [laughs] I was alright until we got to the gate outside the path near the house and it was a gate, you know French houses, they've got all these bars, and I got stuck on this gate once the Germans, there were one in front of me, no two in front of me, two behind me, and they shut the gate and I ran back to the gate and they weren't holding my hand or anything and I hung on to these bars and I screamed my head off until the neighbours came out [laughs] and there were two Germans one on each side trying to unfurl my fingers from these bars and they couldn't otherwise I would have damaged my hands you see. Anyway in the end with all my family on the other side of the gate and in the end, the officers told my Aunt, she was still in her dressing gown, 'five minutes and you can come with her', so my Aunt got dressed quickly, left all her five kids, left her five kids with the grandmother and the maid, we had a living in maid, and off we went with our coats and so I settled down, I had my Aunt with me you know. So suddenly I was all happy again, so we spent the whole day picking up English people all over the place and then in the afternoon it was very cold. It was December and it was very cold and the officer drove in a saloon car with his driver and he took pity on us because we must have been trembling with cold. We had no drink, no food and he told us to come and warm up into his saloon, so we did and of course my Aunt is quite a garrulous person you know, and the officer spoke French so she started speaking to him and everything and he turned round, that's all I remember of the conversation, he turned round and said to my Aunt 'Hitler est fou' [laughs] which I thought 'Oh well if Hitler's mad then I'm safe' [laughs]



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So I felt happy then so I thought well if a German officer is going to say Hitler's mad then I'm alright, so anyway we eventually ended up in Quimper which was the county town and I can't remember whether we stayed in the hospital or in a school but it was a large room and there were lots of women, all English I presume and there weren't enough beds for everybody so a few of us had to share a bed so we exchanged you know and we weren't allowed to go to the bathroom to wash because they brought basin's in the room and when we went to the toilet, which the toilet was at the other end of the corridor outside the room where we were, there were two helmeted armed German soldiers and if one of us went to the loo down the corridor, one of them followed us and then back again. So I stayed there for about a week I think and just the day before we were due to go onto a larger camp near Le Mans apparently I was let off so my Uncle picked me up and we ran back home before they changed their minds and of course while we'd been incarcerated my Uncle moved heaven and earth to get me out and his wife of course. So he got a barrister, got all my papers together and the fact that I had my own passport, took the story to a German general in Quimper who was in charge of the whole County and made him believe I was an abandoned child and they believed it and I was let off for the rest of the war [laughs] So you know I ended up back at school and did the war like everybody else and no German ever bothered me again.

Becky: Frances Rye's wartime story is captivating and provides a real insight into life in occupied France. We will therefore be publishing it in its entirety as a separate podcast episode.

Becky: Returning to life in the Royal Borough, I am now going to talk to Alex White, fellow Museum, Arts and Local Studies Officer at Windsor & Royal Borough Museum to discuss how German bombing raids affected the lives of residents.



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Becky: Hi Alex, thank you for coming on the podcast. I was just wondering if you could tell us a little bit about what the intensity of bombing was like in Windsor and the surrounding areas during the Second World War and whether they were ever strategically targeted?

Alex: Hi Becky, yes certainly. So obviously during the Second World War, Windsor being located in the South East of England very close to London about 14 miles from the centre of London, it was a target. It wasn't a main target due to the lack of any local heavy industry or any really significant RAF fighter or bomber airfields nearby, however there was in the wider area a lot of heavy and light industry so neighbouring towns such as Slough, Maidenhead, Weybridge just further down the river where you had the Brooklyn site and lots of factories. You had the Langley factory that built Hurricanes, so yeah lots of things going on in that Thames corridor that would have provided a target in terms of Windsor actually receiving direct hits of bombs. It would mostly have been accidental or pilots jettisoning bombs that they had left over from other targets or even mistaking sites for other sites that they were actually trying to target. So yeah that's a little bit about the strategic targets and the intensity of bombing earlier in the war, so that was obviously about 1940 to 1941. Moving towards the end of the war, when the RAF had secured control of the skies largely over Britain and the Nazis were being pushed back further into Europe post D Day, we had the launch of the so called revenge weapon, V1 V2 rockets, later on. They were remotely launched unpiloted bombs or rockets that were launched against targets in the South East of the UK as almost like revenge and terror tactics.

Becky: That's really interesting, thank you. So in terms of the V1's and the V2's were there any particular incidents in Windsor that you can tell us about?



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Alex: Yes well there were several incidents of V1 or doodlebugs that landed in the area, the most notorious of which is the incident on 1 July 1944 where a V1 rocket had hit the chimney of the Windsor corporation dust destructor which at the time was situated in Kentons Lane. And that's a very notorious incident with locals at the time and I think we have some interesting records of that.

Becky: I know a lot of volunteers in our museum talk about this incident and from my understanding it was incredibly lucky that nobody was killed, although I believe several were injured but when I've been told about this story or the first time I was told, I was like what is a dust destructor so maybe you could tell us Alex- what is a dust destructor?

Alex: Okay so a dust instructor is the Victorian waste furnace where the street sweepings collected ash, dust, other household and street waste and was taken and incinerated.

Becky: Wow who knew. So shortly we will play some of the oral histories we have that recollect that day and they're all really fascinating but before we do so I just wanted to ask you about another story I often hear that relates to Hitler and Windsor Castle. Could you tell us a little bit about that legend?

Alex: Yeah absolutely. Yeah so there is an unsubstantiated legend, certainly as far as I've found anyway, that Hitler ordered the Luftwaffe not to bomb Windsor Castle during the Second World War. So the origin of this rumour may well be to do with the Marburg files (aka the winter files). So these were a series of top secret German foreign ministry files which were discovered in Germany in May 1945, at the end of the Second World War. So the contents of these files may contain information about the Duke of Windsor and Wallis Simpson and their relationship to the Nazi party and senior Nazis and there have been theories that there were plans for the abdicated King and



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Wallis Simpson to be used as puppet King and Queen of the UK possibly to rule from Windsor Castle. This is all to be linked to several London buildings which were allegedly ear marked by the Nazis' for future use, possibly as a, as a headquarters. So we have Whiteleys which is a famous department store, or was, in Bayswater and we also have the Charles Holden designed Senate House which is the University of London library building now in Bloomsbury and first skyscraper in London and also incidentally the influence for the ministry of truth in George Orwell's 1984.

Becky: Well, that's fascinating. Thank you very much Alex for joining us today and hopefully we'll hear you again soon on a podcast

Alex: yeah, brilliant.

Becky: thank you.

We have quite a few oral histories in our collection that recall the dust destructor incident explained by Alex. Len Nash, for instance, grew up hearing about the day from his grandparents

Len: My Grandad had an allotment further down the road. Anyway one day, this V1, doodlebug came over and hit the recycling site. In fact I think it hit the chimney because I can remember as a kid the chimney was there for ages after and it was sort of like cut off and jagged and black and I think it actually clipped the chimney which was why there was quite an extensive blast there because I think it actually exploded in the air rather than going into the ground and exploding. Anyway, there was this almighty great big bang obviously, and it happened that my Grandad was on his allotment at the time. So Gran apparently heard this bang, so she ran out of the shop and saw this big cloud of smoke and stuff going up so she locked the shop and went down the road and there's my grandad coming the other way and from a distance it looked like he was absolutely covered in blood.



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He was bright red, all his face everything apparently covered. My Gran had fifty fits said 'oh my god'. What is was was brick dust. It was a very hot day and he'd been sweating digging his garden, been digging his allotment, and this thing had gone off thrown him down on the floor, the blast had knocked him on the floor but as he lay there sort of being all sweaty this brick dust came down and of course stuck to him so he was bright orange [laughs] So me Gran ran up to him and gave him a big hug apparently and 'are you alright are you alright?' 'yes of course I'm alright yeah' 'are you hurt? Look at me' 'It's not blood I'm alright' So she turned round and said 'if you'd come back like you said you would in time for your dinner, it wouldn't have happened would it'. So my poor old Grandad got this sort of shellacking from my gran for being later for his dinner and nearly getting blown up by this V1. I thought that was wonderful, typical of my Gran actually.

Becky: Pamela Marson saw the V1 flying bomb pass over Slough.

Pamela: When I was very young my father worked at ICI paints in Slough and every year they had a garden fete and this particular year we went there it was on Petersfield which is right next to the railway in Slough. My father had gone off to Windsor to play a bowls match and I was watching some races and all of a sudden we heard this noise and people looked up and over the factory, the ICI factory, 'it's a doodlebug' 'it's a doodlebug' and we all watched it as it went over our heads and over the railway and the sort of sigh of relief it had gone and we watched it go into the distance and suddenly it stopped and there was sort of screams 'it's stopped, it's stopped, it's stopped' and suddenly it fell and I saw pink dust coming up in the air.

Becky: John Hancock describes how the incident could have been more devastating than it fortunately was.



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John: But I remember another incident during the war, and this of course has been very fairly well documented. I was at the Imperial Service College Junior School in Imperial Road and I used to score for the first 11 and one afternoon, one bright sunny afternoon, there was all the pitch and cricketers out there playing cricket and there was a moat, round the Clewer Manor as it was called then, it was Fosters House before that and all of a sudden there was I minding my own business, rather minding my scoring business and all the cricketers suddenly flung themselves flat on the ground and by the time I'd got into the ditch, the moat, there was an enormous explosion and it was when this flying bomb, this doodlebug hit the dust destructor at Clewer and it was fortunate very fortunate because the Imperial Service Junior School had a huge school room with huge windows either end and up till about half an hour or less before this incident the whole school used to gather in there for a sort of quiet hour after lunch and had that bomb gone off because all the windows were blown in right the way across into smithereens shards of glass everywhere and if they'd all been in there then, then it would have been absolute murder but it wasn't, nobody was hurt there, I think there was one or two but not many people, no I don't think anybody was killed actually on the dust destructor because it hit the dust destructor high up. Again if it had come down amongst the houses that again would have been a very much more serious thing.

Becky: Unfortunately for Robert Heybourn, however, his family home was damaged by the doodlebug.

Robert: When I was very young, my mother told me that we had a doodlebug hit the dust destructor in Kentons Lane and there were three or four houses that were really damaged by the blast of which ours was the middle one and I do remember, probably my very fast memory, was of the man painting, distemping the rebuilt kitchen saying 'slap dash slap dash' all day long. I remember that particularly



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but I was out when the doodlebug actually hit. I'd been taken down the shops down to on the corner of our road with my godmother and my next-door neighbour so I was lucky. Had I been at home I would have probably been badly hurt.

Becky: On the exact same day as the dust destructor was hit, another V1 flying bomb exploded in Maidenhead. I am now going to talk to Richard Poad, Chairman of the Maidenhead Heritage Centre, to find out more about it and speak more generally about Maidenhead and the Second World War.

Becky: Hello Richard, thank you very much for being on the Windsor and Royal Borough Museum podcast. To begin, would you be able to tell us how Maidenhead and the surrounding areas fared in terms of bombing during the Second World War?

Richard: Well first of all Becky, thank you for inviting me to take part in your podcast. It's important that as you're the Windsor and Royal Borough that you get something in from the western end of the Borough. Maidenhead had a quiet war really. There were various bombing raids but most of them were random. The general belief was that the German bombers had missed their planned targets and were dumping the bombs before they headed back home and in fact the doodlebug, V1 flying bomb that landed in Maidenhead, like the one that landed in Windsor, had overshot London and just happened to hit Maidenhead. But mercifully it only killed one person, but it landed in the Cordwallis area and damaged 1000 buildings within a radius of about 5 or 600 yards around about. If it had gone another couple of 100 yards it would have landed on a well-known jam factory, the Saint Martins jam factory, that would make quite a blaze quite ablaze. But we've got a couple of oral history eyewitness accounts from our archive. From the late 90s I think these interviews were done. There was a lady called Zena Shepherd who was eight at the time and she



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was coming home from the shops with her granny. She was inclined to dawdle and granny kept hurrying her along and they got back to granny's house in Harrow Lane. She went upstairs and was looking out of the window when there was an almighty explosion and she saw debris flying absolutely everywhere. There you are said granny, I knew something was going to happen so just goes to put even in far off days granny's were precedent and knew everything. There's another quotation from a man called Peter Keeley who was born in 1927. He was actually working in a factory not far from where the V1 landed and I'm grateful for one of your volunteers for reading this particular extract. It's quite interesting because... well you listen to it:

'I was working at Dynatron on the Saturday the flying bomb dropped on the Cordwallis trading estate. It dropped into the back garden of a big old house that was there and completely blew the house out. In the factory there were four of us working there moving the benches around. I remember I was standing on a bench doing some wiring. I heard this flying bomb coming over, and then it stopped, then all I can remember is seeing this load of dust coming towards me. The implosion came after the noise, so I just saw the dust. The next thing I knew I was under the bench. One side of my white smock was white and the other side was all black. How I came out with no damage was amazing. I was really shocked but not hurt. When I got home my mum said I just broke down. The day after, we went back and it was terrible'.

Becky: That's a really eye opening testimony and illustrates just how terrifying the flying bombs were and thank you Richard for providing that reflection. So that recalled a V1 flying bomb, were there any instances of a V2 exploding in Maidenhead?

Richard: There was one V2. It was late March 1945, so it was a last throw of the dice really on the part of Hitler. And another stray V2 that



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had gone beyond London as it were, it blew up in the air over Pinkneys Green and the main warhead actually landed a little bit further west at Cockpole green, I think it's called. But at Pinkneys Green there was some German prisoners of war working on a local farm, planting some potatoes and they all stopped and cheered so they all thought perhaps we'll win this yet but of course they didn't.

Becky: Goodness, that's really interesting. Richard, I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about White Waltham Airfield and the Air Transport Auxiliary during the Second World War?

Richard: White Waltham we've been talking about bombing, White Waltham was actually bombed in July 1940. It was a target. We have in our collection at Maidenhead Heritage Centre a German reconnaissance map dating from the late 30s, probably 1938. They had interpreted an aerial photograph which shows fields marked out but they're only marked out with sort of black paint on the grass to deceive the photographers from on high and it looks as though there are hedges and clumps of trees and things but there are a bunch of buildings alongside the Great Western Railway line which the interpreters thought was an aircraft assembly plant which was not the case as it happens. So the text says this has been recognised as an aircraft assembly plant and therefore is a legitimate military target. The photograph was correctly interpreted but it was the last bit as to what the heck the big hangers were being used for. So, it was bombed in July 1940 and one man was killed and several injured. 7 Tiger Moth trainer biplanes were destroyed and operations briefly had to move to relief airfields in Bray and Waltham St Lawrence but at the time the airfield was home to an RAF elementary flying school and to the expanding air transport auxiliary which is Maidenhead's only significant claim to wartime fame and at Maidenhead Heritage Centre our hugely important ATA collection even has its own website which is called atamuseum.org. ATA was a civilian organisation, that's very



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important, which took over from the RAF the ferrying of war planes between factories and frontline squadrons and it employed men and women pilots of 25 different nationalities, so it's an international story, and over the course of World War II, they ferried over 309,000 aeroplanes of 147 different types which is just astonishing and in fact White Waltham was also an ATA training school for people who were moving up from single engine aeroplanes like Hurricanes and Spitfire and so on to twin engine aeroplanes like Mosquitoes and Wellington Bombers and they had bases all over the country all the way from Inverness in Scotland down to Hamble on Southampton water but the HQ and nerve centre of the whole thing was at White Waltham. So as well as pilots, there were a huge number of ground staff here, everybody from canteen workers to parachute packers to record keepers. The ground engineers and most of these were local people and an awful lot of them were local women and one lady called Wynne Roper who was recruited to be the ground engineer, told me that when she went in the hangers, she didn't know one end of a spanner from the other. When she came out the other end she was a qualified fitter and there was another lady who was actually a trained architect and she was working in the works department designing toilet blocks for new 88 bases and in 1940, early 1941, when they ran out of experienced pilots to recruit, somebody opened the office door and said 'Eleanor you fancy learning to fly?' and she turned into a pilot and ended up flying 30 something different types of aeroplane, so it was an astonishing organisation which made an contribution to the war effort that can't really be underestimated, or rather overestimated. It effectively, they were running a conveyor belt of serviceable aeroplanes to the RAF and the fleet air arm to enable them to pursue the battle in the Sky, so it was terrific and the work of an ATA pilot was incredibly varied. They didn't know from one day to the next what they would be flying tomorrow and they often did days



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works where they flew half a dozen even more flights in a single day and with every single flight being in a different sort of aeroplane varying from an old fashioned biplane Tiger Moth to something as big as a Lancaster bomber and everything else in between. I'm a retired pilot and every time I read this story my mind is boggled. It's just extraordinary, so it's a fantastic story and if people listening what to know more about it, I invite them to go to our ATA website and have a read, it's just astonishing.

Becky: Richard is there anything else that you would like to share about Maidenhead's war more generally?

Richard: Yes, I think it's important, as the ATA wasn't the only thing here. First of all, like every other town in Britain factories of all kinds, all shapes and sizes, produced equipment for the war effort. A company called Dynatron radio and some of your older listeners might actually remember Dyatron radios in the post war period. They produced radar simulators to help train radar operators and that was an absolutely essential task of course. In Oldfield Road the Widney works produced parts for Halifax bombers and a company called British Ermeto supplied steel and brass fittings for the Royal Navy and over one million cupplings for heavy bombers. Even the posh Biggs the jewellers in Maidenhead on the High Street where Queen Mary used to come and shop made delicate measuring instruments for various electrical appliances, so the list goes on. The general population was of course, and especially women because so many of men were away fighting, did all manner of tasks and a lot of fund raising. Maidenhead raised 5000 pounds to buy a Spitfire and adopted a ship called HMS Matchless. There was even a home guard Thames patrol on the river and there was a British restaurant in Maidenhead next to where the Town Hall is which was said to be the best two bobs worth in Maidenhead and it was producing 360 meals every lunchtime and things like that and a lot of the people who work



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there were actually WVS workers and so on. We had one very famous exile that was Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands who came and lived at Stubbings House in Maidenhead thicket where members of the Dutch government in exile used to go and visit her and one young woman I spoke to, well she was actually old when I spoke to her but she was young at the incident, she was talking about called Peggy Monday was walking in the woods at Maidenhead thicket one day and met one of Wilhelmina's bodyguards walking her dogs and instantly fell in love with a man in the uniform. She didn't marry him but actually she stayed in touch with him for years and years and years after the war which I think is an absolutely lovely story. All manner of big wigs as you might expect visited the ATA at White Waltham including Eleanor Roosevelt, President Roosevelt's wife who wanted in particular to meet some of the American pilots. The Americans were the largest non-British contingent in Air Transport Auxiliary. The King and Queen came one day and later the same day the Royals visited the land girls working among the mangled wurzles. The Queen wore pearls of course and powder blue booties which apparently matched her coat, but I don't think she really wielded a spade at any stage.

Becky: That's brilliant. Thank you, and if our listeners wanted to find out more about your collections and maybe visit some of your online exhibitions, where should they go?

Richard: Well like all museums, we can't deliver food parcels but we can nourish the mind through our two websites and our online websites. The websites are called maidenheadheritage.org.uk and ATAmuseum.org. If you're stuck just google Maidenhead Heritage Centre. We've just published online on Tuesday an online book all about VE day with some recipes in it including one for Woolton pie produced by the food ministry under Lord Woolton. I wouldn't recommend it to anybody because my mother who was a medic said



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during the war it was known because of its unfortunate side effects as 'wind and water pie'.

Becky: Ohhh, I'm intrigued to know what ingredients were in this now.

Richard: Well lots of root vegetables and cabbage and things like that.

Becky: I'll be looking up the recipe.

Richard: There is a recipe in the booklet which is on our website and we have also put up for those people who happen to be schooling children at home, there are a couple of school worksheets available online as well. And that's where you'll find 9 online exhibitions at the moment including one about Skindles Hotel, the scandalous Skindles hotel, one about ATA and there are more of those to come and of course our Facebook page has lots of interest, including quizzes and 'object of the month' and so on. If any of your listeners would like to go up there and follow our Facebook, we'd be ever so pleased. We're also like so many people coming to grips with zoom and we hope to run our first online lecture which will be about the Dunkirk little ships and that evacuation which was 80 years ago at the end of this month and we hope to have that on running within the next couple of weeks so please watch our website for that. We have no idea when we will be allowed to open again but all I can say is that our wonderful volunteers are all raring to go.

Becky: Aww, yes, I'm sure you have wonderful volunteers like we do at the Windsor and Royal Borough Museum. We're very lucky to have them.

Richard: Yep absolutely

Becky: Well thank you so much for being on our podcast today

Richard we very much appreciate it.

Richard: Thank you for the invite



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Becky: Of course.

Becky: In December 1941, Parliament extended conscription and now required all single women between the ages of 20 and 30 and men up to the age of 60 to do some form of national service. As Richard explained, for many in the Royal Borough this meant working in nearby factories that were producing equipment, ammunitions, aircraft parts and other essential items for the war effort.

Bessie Harrison from Windsor worked at a factory in Slough, producing radio parts for aircrafts.

Interviewer: Can we go back a bit to the war time. I think you mentioned that you had to work in ammunitions during the war. Was that in Slough?

Bessie: Slough, it was McMichael radio in Wexham. Quite a few of us, friends and I went over to the same place and we hated it to start with but we got to like it. Do you know, it was quite interesting really, we were there for quite a long time.

Interviewer: What did you have to do?

Bessie: Well it was all mostly little things to go in aircraft and that sort of thing you know, the radio part of it.

Interviewer: How long was that for?

Bessie: Oh I can't remember, quite a long time. We must have been there two or three years. We made some good friends over there though.

Interviewer: I expect there a lot of chat and fun amongst the workers?

Bessie: Sorry?

Interviewer: Was there a lot of chat and fun amongst the workers?

Bessie: Oh yes, they were quite a good crowd of people really.



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Interviewer: How did you get to and from Slough?

Bessie: By bus.

Interviewer: Was it a special bus for you?

Bessie: No, no, we had to start 7:30 in the morning, catch a bus, quite often work till 7:30 at night when it was over time, busy.

Interviewer: That's a very long working day.

Bessie: It was but we got some fun out of it though.

Interviewer: Did your mum have the dinner ready for you when you got home?

Bessie: Oh yes she always did.

Becky: Whether engaged in war work or not, everyone on the home front felt the effects of total war. The Blackout was introduced immediately after war was declared and by January 1940 rationing was introduced. To begin this only applied to bacon, butter and sugar, but further food items were subsequently added, along with clothing and petrol.

The following is a reading of Dorothy Fuller's memories of rationing. She was born in 1927 and grew up in Maidenhead.

'The only time we ever had anything extra was Christmas. They allowed extra sugar when the fruit picking was about so you could preserve or make jam. There was a point system for tinned goods. We were lucky in our family because my grandmother had been a cook and she could make a meal out of tuppence. We had chickens and we got an egg a day from them. Dried egg was ideal for scrambled egg. You could buy whale meat from the butcher, which wasn't rationed.'



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Becky: June Rainer from Windsor also recalls getting whale meat from the butcher

June: I can remember going in there one day and you could always get liver and offal and things that wasn't on the ration books so if he had it in you were lucky in them days. I can remember one day, I went in there and he said 'oh we've got this nice stuff today' and it happened to be whale meat. I didn't know at the time that it was whale meat. So because I used to do the cooking and things, I was only a child but I still used to do it all, and I went home and I can remember making this meat pudding and I couldn't find anything to wrap it in so I had this green striped dress and with this green striped dress I tore a piece off and tied the pudding in it. Well I know when we went to eat the pudding, it had a few stripes in it but in those days you didn't worry about things like that because you were glad to have the meat pudding you know what I mean. So anyhow my Dad said 'what's this, it smells fishy', so I said 'it's whale meat Dad' and of course that caused riots in the house didn't it, so we didn't use that no more did we, we didn't come to that again.

Becky: The following is an extract from Peter Emmons wartime reflections. He lived with his family in Maidenhead.

'We ran our shop Emmons Brothers in Queen Street. We would have a queue for onions that went around the streets. Oranges and bananas were in short supply. Potatoes were plentiful – there was a national competition for the best window depicting potatoes. We fashioned up 'Potato Pete', a doll, and made up small sacks of potatoes to dress the window. We won the competition!'

Becky: The next clip is a reading of a memory from Sheila Smith, born 1929 and also from Maidenhead.



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‘Clothing rationing was quite hard but you became very ingenious. My father came home with a load of what might have been ammunition parachutes and they were bright yellow – I had buttercup yellow knickers!’

Becky: Everyone in Britain had their lives completely transformed by the demands and consequences of total war. Many had lost loved ones who were fighting overseas, and now as war was no longer confined to the battlefields, many lost their homes, their livelihoods and witnessed first-hand the devastation caused by weapons from the air. People would carry these memories with them for the rest of their lives and this is something to reflect upon as we commemorate VE day 75 years on.

However, despite all the turmoil and trauma, for a few, there were some happy things that came from the war. Helen Grout describes how she met her husband whilst she was a nurse in Turkey and following the end of the war, moved to live with him in his hometown of Windsor.

Interviewer: How long did you live in Turkey for?

Helen: I came here in 1945

Interviewer: OK why did you come here?

Helen: Because I married a service man in Turkey.

Interviewer: And what was his name?

Helen: Bill Grout, William Grout

Interviewer: And how did you meet William?

Helen: How did I meet William? Well during the last war, Turkey wasn't at war but there were a lot of servicemen in Istanbul. They were watching the enemy not to go through Turkey and the British



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community in Istanbul arranged dance evenings to keep the boys happy. They lived in a camp and asked to English speaking girls to dance with them and of course I was a nurse at the American hospital and we had an invitation and I met him there.

Interviewer: So you were how old were you when you met him?

Helen: How old was I? I was in my early 30s

Interviewer: And you were working as a nurse?

Helen: I was working as a nurse. I was trained at the American hospital. I could speak English.

Interviewer: Can you describe some of the dance evenings, what they were like the dances? What were they like?

Helen: Well like everybody else they we're in a hotel and there was a group of musicians just playing the dance music and we were dancing.

Interviewer: What kind of dances did you dance?

Helen: Foxtrot, tango

Interviewer: People don't dance those very much anymore.

Helen: They don't?

Interviewer: Not as much anymore no. It's a real shame. So, when you met your husband or husband to be, how long before you married him when did you marry him?

Helen: Well we met in November. We were engaged in January and he asked has to be married but he was a soldier of course and he had to wait so long before he can marry me and before we could get married the war was over, so they all into uniform because there was so much to clear, so much work, so this went on and on. We couldn't get married until October.



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Interviewer: So you had to wait a long time?

Helen: Yes

Interviewer: How did you feel about that?

Helen: Well we had to obey the orders, he couldn't help it.

Interviewer: And when you married in October, what year was that?

Helen: 1945

Interviewer: And then you moved straight to Windsor?

Helen: No, we had to wait for transport. Everything was upside down. Then they sent us to Beirut first to see if we could get on a boat. No we couldn't, then they sent us to Egypt so we were there a month before a boat came and took us to Glasgow and from Glasgow we got a train to come to Windsor.

Interviewer: That's quite a journey.

Helen: Well yes, it was quite a journey.

Interviewer: Do you have any memories from that journey? Do you remember anything from the journey?

Helen: Well men were in one part of the boat, and the women were in the other part. There was a lot of separation but you had to, it was war.

Becky: VE day was of course a celebration. It was the beginning of the end, the starting point of the hope for a better world, one that was characterised by freedom, equality and peace. However, it is important to remember that even after Japan surrendered on 15 August 1945, bringing the war to a final close, the effects of the Second World War remained for a long time to come, and this was true at an international level but also individually.



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Many found it hard to adjust to civilian life after years of war and others had to try and cope in a world without loved ones and live with their traumatising experiences. The economic consequences of war would take their toll and rationing would continue for many years.

Everything was transformed. The world, the Royal Borough and individuals were all shaped by the all-encompassing Second World War.

Thank you for listening to the Windsor and Royal Borough Museum's VE Day podcast. We hope the histories we have shared will enable you to reflect on the varying ways in which war was experienced by individuals in your local area. We will also be publishing Mrs Frances Rye's interview in its entirety so look out for it on our YouTube channel. We hope you will join us again for our next episode.