

Dedham Vale Society

Article 2: Life in Dedham in wartime

A few weeks before he died in the autumn of 2005 DVS member Roger Freeman, local farmer, distinguished author and acclaimed WW2 historian, dictated an account of some of his personal memories of Dedham during the five year-period of the 2nd World War to the editor. This is the second part of that account with more to follow. These poignant boyhood memories, recounted with such clarity and at a time when he was clearly suffering, give a fascinating and invaluable account of what many of the more senior members of the DVS will themselves still remember.

When war broke out food production became a critical objective and if you were a dairy farmer you had to plough up a certain acreage and put it down to crops, to wheat, barley etc. My father had his first field ploughed up in 1939 and later bought his own tractors to take on other land, some of which was derelict, eventually having some 300 acres under the plough after starting off with only 35.

Some of the little farms were directed to let other farmers cultivate their land, this happening to one or two in Dedham, to my knowledge. The "War Ag" was an organisation which included bureaucrats from the Ministry of Agriculture and prominent local farmers and they could be pretty ruthless. In fact, they had the power to boot a farmer out if he didn't do what he was told. In other words, if you were told to plough and you didn't, then they had the right to take over the cultivation and remove you if they considered you weren't an efficient farmer. I don't think this actually occurred in Dedham but it certainly did in other parishes. The committee were incredibly dictatorial, and of course it was a critical situation, but even a most unlikely field in the village which required a crawler tractor because of its steepness, was ploughed for two or three years during the war.

Arable crops, mainly wheat, but also barley, oats and sugar-beet were the common scene. Meadows predominately in Dedham pre-war but by 1945 an almost complete change to arable had taken place. The only arable within the parish before the war that was really successfully farmed was the market garden set up by James Moorhouse, a gentleman-farmer who had acquired Jupes Hill Farm, much of the produce being sent to Covent Garden, everything from rhubarb to broccoli.

The biggest market-garden farm in the area was in Ardleigh, belonging to the Edwards brothers, but similar farms existed in many other neighbouring parishes in addition to a not inconsiderable number of fruit-farms, mostly apple, and those particularly in Langham, Boxted, Stoke by Nayland and Holton.

Labour, of course, was a problem for this expansion in farming and we had, like most farms, younger men who left to join the services. We were then faced with getting older men back on to the land, retired men in their seventies. I can remember we had a man called Horace Ellis, a wonderful character, who, as a schoolboy had waved a flag as the railway was opened from Ipswich to Felixstowe on May 1st 1877. That shows you how old he must have been in the 1940s! I always remember him scything round the outside of a field when the first combine-harvester in the area arrived to cut the rest. I always wished I had taken a photograph of the contrast between those two forms of agricultural harvest.

We also had people who would not have been employed before the war. Can I put it kindly - 'one penny short of a pound' people - and there were a lot of them about in villages because they weren't locked up in those days. People knew that if you were a bit not-quite-the-ticket, you were still an accepted member of the village. You don't see anybody like that today, but you did then, and quite characters.

The village was visited by travelling film vans, the picture being projected on to the back of the vehicle. This was the Ministry of Information providing propaganda films to cheer-up the locals. But for most of our entertainment we relied on the radio, although the first television set in the village was purchased in 1939 by the people who lived at Stour House, the rumour going round that they had visible talking pictures on a box in their house, but, of course, there were no TV broadcasts during the war.

My father was recruited into the White Star Band as guitarist, but to my ear the music was somewhat squeaky and the violinist, Mr Hitchcock, never really did get the hang of dance music. Doris Soames played the piano and there was also a saxophonist who lived in Monks Lane. It wasn't the most melodious of bands, but they played for dances at the Hewitt Hall and people accepted them as making a good contribution to the war effort.

I must tell you more about dear Mrs Soames, a wonderful warm-hearted character who kept the Lamb Inn. One day my mother saw her climbing up a step-ladder against the wall of the pub and jumping off the top. Mother thought "Good God, she's gone off her rocker," and so thinking that the woman was in distress, she went across and exclaimed, "Is there something wrong Doris?" and she retorted "I'm trying to get rid of the bugger". The child was never born. Doris was very, very free with her favours during the war. Her husband was in Burma and she was a lady who, apparently, could not say 'no'. But she was the nicest, kind-hearted woman you could ever wish to meet. Her husband was a dear old soul; he used to do building work for me and I think he just tolerated Doris's behaviour.

Charlie Shepherd, a retired solicitor, lived at Rye Farm on the Long Road and he had a son in the army flying Auster spotter-planes in the area. He would occasionally appear and fly across Rye field, a few feet above the ground to his father's house, and then pull up sharply. My father and one of my men were on the Rye field one day and had to throw themselves on the ground. I mentioned this to Charlie's son after the war and he said, "Yes, I remember that. It was great fun".

Probably the most adventurous was the son of Mr Bryant, the farmer at Langham who had a dairy farm to the northern end of the village. Bryant's son was a fighter pilot in the RAF flying Typhoons which were a notorious ground-attack aircraft with a very high casualty rate after D-Day. It was very vulnerable to anti-aircraft fire from the ground and a Typhoon pilot had a one-in-two chance of surviving. But young Bryant, he really was a daredevil, would bring his aircraft over and to the amazement of my friends and I, would fly among the hedgerows with this thing before crossing the A12 towards his father's farm where he would pull up abruptly. My father met Mr Bryant senior at a farm sale one day and remarked on his son's flying stunts and Mr Bryant replied in sober terms, "I wish the boy wouldn't do that. He don't half frighten my cows".

I was at Boxted airfield on a summer evening in 1944 with my father checking the condition of the hay, whether or not it was fit to cart, when through the hedge came a very, very large, fat American sergeant who called out to my father "Hey Pop, can you give us a lift back to camp when you go?" So father, seeing this portly man said, "Yes, yes, I'll do that for you". What he didn't realise was that behind the hedge were another nine or ten Americans. Father said, "Well I don't think I can get you all in my car..." They hung on the roof, they hung on the back, they stood on the running-boards. The big fat sergeant, who was in command, sat in the passenger seat and put me on his lap; he had a yellow rose in his hand, he stunk of beer and he said that a lady had given him the rose from her garden, "She was the landlady of the Fox where we boys have been" he said, "I'm taking it back to camp and I'm going to press it and take it back to the States when I go. You smell this Pop, you smell this boy". He kept jabbing the rose under our noses as we took them all back to camp. A wonder the springs didn't go, - there were eleven people on or in the car and when we arrived at the entrance gate, father wouldn't take anything for it, so they showered loose coins through the open window. I thought this was wonderful but, of course, father said that he didn't want any payment. So I picked all the coins up and found that I had the extraordinary sum of about two pounds something, which was a lot of money as I was on just a few shillings. But my father decided it was too much for a youngster and took it away from me!



Boxted June 1943. The aircraft and crew had just arrived from the USA. To the left the taller man is the radio-operator, Henry Farwell who is still living in London.



Boxted Aerodrome, 40 Marauders on the tarmac

We used to stop at the Ardleigh Crown, after we had been hay making, with the hay cart. Beer, for the farmer, was a common gift if you had been working. We'd get beer from the pubs at harvest time, out on the fields and we stopped at the Ardleigh Crown once, because we'd just come off the airfield and there was a Yank outside and he saw the rope and he picked this rope off the cart, a cart rope, and the carts were empty and I said to him "Are you a cowboy?". He said "Yeh. I was a cowboy". I said "Can you lasso?" He said "Yeh, I can lasso" and he did this rope up and he squiggled it around old Horry Allis, who was walking towards the pub door, and lassoed him. Extraordinary, he didn't think it was at all funny, but we were amazed, he was a genuine cowhand.

The pubs. Yes. We always used to take a flagon to the local pub, near to the Lamb or wherever we were working, get it filled up with beer and out into the fields with the working men. It was expected at harvest time, and at harvest time you recruited all the labour you could because there were sheaves then of wheat and barley and you had to get them in quickly and there was schoolboy labour, housewife labour. We even had soldiers from the local area, who were game enough to come. Everyone got on the farm fields at harvest time.



A pre-war view of Ardleigh Crown, adjacent now to the A12/A120 interchange

22. The Crown Inn situated on the old Ipswich Road. This photograph was taken in 1933 when the proprietor was Christopher Whythead. Also recently badly damaged by fire, happily it is now restored to its former glory.