

RECOLLECTIONS OF THE HOME GUARD IN WINDSOR



Fig. 1. World War II Postcard

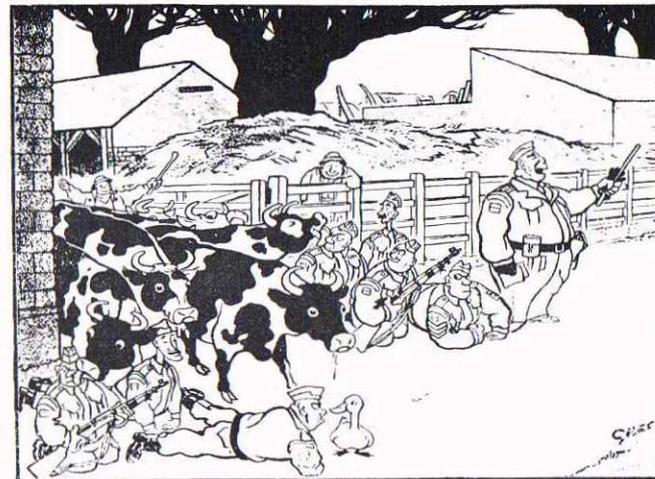
'Dad's Army' was one of the most popular of all TV and Radio programmes. It was often far-fetched. Yet it achieved a measure of credibility because it was a recognisable caricature of the real thing.

What follows is an attempt to record some of my experiences as a member of the Home Guard in Windsor during the last war. It is not a history, merely a few vivid recollections of what went on in a particular platoon ('E' Platoon) of a particular unit based on part of Clewer and Dedworth.

The Home Guard was called into being during the critical days of May 1940 when the German overran Holland and Belgium and invaded France. We enrolled at the old Police Station in St Leonard's Road and were assigned to our appropriate local company. Some were veterans of the 1914-1918 War; a few, it was rumoured, had fought in the Boer War but kept their secret because there was an upper age limit of 65; some were in reserved occupations or were medically unfit for full military service; some were younger men awaiting their call-up. In the early days in particular, when enlistment remained largely voluntary, a camaraderie developed which outlasted the war. To begin with, arms and equipment were in short supply. By the time the Home Guard was no longer needed both were of a high standard. Officers too became more proficient as time went on. The first Windsor commanding officer was Sir George Crichton, who probably did go back to the Boer War. Sir George was later succeeded by Col. Reid, who was, unlike Sir George, both efficient and articulate. In the course of time the Home Guard became a trained professional force, but in the nature of things it was 'in the course of time'.

The early weeks were dominated by the imminence of invasion. We had, in the short space of a few months, seen Poland, Denmark, Norway, Holland, Belgium and now France overcome by the Nazi blitzkriegs. Fifth columnists, parachutists, saboteurs - no one knew in what guise the enemy would first appear.

One of our first operations was to construct a defensive barricade at the western end of the borough. Most of the present Windsor beyond The Wolf was then



"I want you men to imagine the enemy are approaching in large numbers, supported by tanks, flamethrowers, paratroops, etc., etc. . . ."

open country and our line of defence was based on Smith's Lane. We filled thousands of bags with earth - sand was not readily available - and built barricades and road blocks whose mouldering remains could be seen for many years. While we worked feverishly to prepare to resist a German advance on Windsor from the direction of Bray, the Bray Home Guard, only a few hundred yards up the road, was similarly preparing to resist a German advance on Bray from the direction of Windsor. Much of the activity of the Home Guard in the early days seemed naively parochial - the first name of the Home Guard was in fact the Local Defence Volunteers. Our contacts with other units seemed minimal and even our relations with other local bodies such as the A.R.P. were distinctly distant.

Night Patrols were another important form of activity. We normally went in pairs. My own favoured route was over St. Leonard's Hill. I can still remember the beauty of the pseudo-classical 'Ruins', ghostly in the moonlight. One of my companions was Jack Fairbrother, who later became a Professor of Physics. We had long political and philosophical discussions and would sometimes call in at home at 3 o'clock in the morning to consult books and check references. On the whole these patrols were uneventful, but there were low-down characters who sought fun by inspecting the identity cards of the amorous occupants of cars parked in out-of-the-way places.

Some members of the platoon worked out a patrol based on a circuit of the pubs in our sector of Clewer and Dedworth. After all, where were spies more likely to be than in public houses where to eavesdrop on local gossip was obviously easy? These (the pubs) included the the Bricklayers Arms in Hatch Lane, the Prince Albert, the Sebastopol and the Wolf in Clewer Hill Road and the Black Horse and the Queen in Dedworth Road, with the Three Elms as the final port of call. Two of those on patrol on one occasion became a trifle too merry and let off their rifles (the ammunition fortunately was blank). This gave rise to an enquiry and discipline was accordingly tightened.

Although our platoon had its training headquarters at St Katherine's Hall (now demolished) near Brickwall in Clarence Road, night patrols were based on the stables at Vale House (now also demolished). I remember one hot summer night, when the