

BARNET MUSEUM
LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY



BARNET HISTORY JOURNAL

VJ DAY SPECIAL



On 8th May we published a special edition of the History Society Journal commemorating the 75th anniversary of VE Day - the ending of the Second World War in Europe. We reviewed how the event was celebrated in Chipping Barnet and paid tribute to the townsfolk who had sacrificed their lives in achieving that victory. We also remembered that the festivities were tempered by the knowledge that the war still raged in the far-east; the fighting there would continue until Imperial Japan surrendered on 15th August 1945 - VJ Day.

To mark the 75th anniversary of Victory over Japan Day - the true end of the Second World War - we now publish a further special edition of the Journal exploring how the town marked that second momentous event, and we again remember those of the town who gave their lives during the conflict, particularly now those who died serving in the far-east.

VE Day was announced by Winston Churchill - who as Prime Minister since 10th May 1940 had led the nation through most of the war. A long overdue General Election lay ahead and he resigned on 23rd May, continuing to lead a coalition government, known as Churchill's 'Caretaker Ministry', until he was succeeded as Premier by Clement Attlee on 26th July 1945.

Announcing the final victory therefore fell to Mr Attlee; broadcasting at midnight from Downing Street he said 'The last of our enemies is laid low. Peace has once again come to the world. Let us thank God for this great deliverance and his mercies. Long Live the King'.

King George VI addressed the nation and the Empire at nine o'clock that evening saying; 'Yet there is not one of us who has experienced this terrible war who does not realise that we shall feel its inevitable consequences long after we have all forgotten our rejoicings today'. The Royal Family then waved from the balcony at Buckingham Palace to the crowds that had gathered outside. Major buildings across London were floodlit marking the victory and the crowds continued to mass long into the night - not just in the capital but also in towns and cities across the land.

Chipping Barnet was no exception; church bells were rung, people sang and danced in the streets and bonfires and fireworks lit up the night as the festivities continued.

On Saturday 18th August the Barnet Press reporting of the events suggested that the celebrations here had perhaps been more subdued than those seen on VE Day; perhaps with VJ Day falling the previous Wednesday this might in part have been due to the paper having less time to gather fuller details about them before going to press than was the case in May.

THE COMING OF PEACE

Districts Celebrate the
End of War
FESTIVITIES IN TOWN & VILLAGE
Midnight Announcement Unheard
by Many

Local events had certainly been slow to start that Wednesday as many had indeed missed the Prime Minister's midnight broadcast, only learning the news on hearing the 8 am radio bulletin or finding when leaving for work that public transport was operating to a Sunday timetable. But by the evening it appears that things were beginning to really warm up - helped along by the lighting of the historic beacon atop St Mary the Virgin Church at Monken Hadley. The Press had indicated in May that this would need to await victory in the far-east, and Press readers still enjoying the fireworks may well have smiled on reading that amongst those who had prepared the beacon had been the verger, Mr F Rockett....

The following weekend the paper revealed that the festivities had continued for several days, particularly marked by many street parties held for children across the town. The headline that week reflected the mood had moved more towards 'Thanksgiving following Celebration' with local churches filled by large congregations that included members and officials of municipal authorities and representatives of local organisations.

Perhaps a clearer indication of the enthusiasm with which at least some of the people of the town were responding to the news is revealed in the following extract from the November 2010 edition of the Marshwood Vale Magazine in Dorset in which a contributor, Derek Stevens, provided a brief but informative personal recollection of the events here from his time spent as an evacuee living with his cousin in the town:

"In my village a VE-Day celebration was held on the playing fields..... Three months later we were to celebrate VJ-Day, the end of the war in the far-east. I was in Barnet, north of London, with my cousin Jean with whom I had been evacuated at the outbreak of war. We walked around the streets in and out of street parties and around bonfires. I remember being somewhat shocked as I heard crowds singing 'Roll me over in the clover, lay me down and do it again'. Quite shocking I thought."

Although the press reports suggested that events were subdued, underlying spirits were clearly and justifiably high - although for the many waiting for news of loved ones still serving overseas, and especially now for those who had fought on, forgotten by many, in the far-east, the war would not really be over until they returned - unless sadder news reached them regarding injury or even death, perhaps received months, even years, after the event.

Research conducted by the museum into the service and family history of the Second World War men who are remembered on the Chipping Barnet war memorial has identified eleven who fell during the conflict in the far-east. The true fate of three of them would almost certainly not have reached their families until after the war had ended - Prisoners of War, their stories reveal tremendous hardship and suffering and we remember them below.

THE 'HELL SHIPS'

Many of the ordeals that were suffered by British and Allied Prisoners of War taken during the fighting in the far-east are too well known to need repeating here.

However, one aspect is not perhaps so widely known - the inhumane transfer of prisoners to camps in Japan or other occupied islands crowded into the holds of former cargo ships.

The conditions they suffered were appalling. Journeys could last for weeks, often with stops along the way when prisoners remained locked in with no ventilation and in searing heat. Little if any food or water was provided, and the conditions were filthy and unhygienic. Those who survived would then be expected to work as slave labour - the equivalent of the 'Death Railway' in Burma transposed to the fields and factories of the Japanese war effort.

As if this was not horror enough, many of the so called 'Hell Ships' were targeted and sunk by air or torpedo attack from US forces whilst en-route, mistakenly assumed to be Japanese military transport vessels.

Some 20,000 Allied PoWs died from this 'friendly fire' - at least three were Barnet men:-

Private Frank Ernest Frenchum, Middlesex Regiment aged 24; died on 1st October 1942, torpedoed aboard the *Lisbon Maru*. Remembered on the Sai Wan Memorial in China.

Aircraftsman Jonathan Henry George Hunt, RAFVR aged 29; died on 29th November 1943, torpedoed aboard the *Suez Maru*. Remembered on the Singapore Memorial.

Lieutenant Norval David Home, Suffolk Regiment aged 33; died on 21st September 1944, attacked by air aboard the *Hofuku Maru*. Remembered on the Singapore Memorial.

They are also remembered on the Chipping Barnet memorial.

LOCAL MEN WITH NO LOCAL MEMORIALS

We also acknowledge here the sacrifice made by two further men of the town whose names do not appear on a local memorial. One was also a Japanese PoW; the other - as one of a party of twelve - showed courage 'above and beyond' the call of duty leading to his execution having taken part in one of the more famous operations carried out during the war. Their fate would also not have been fully known until after the war had ended.

Our research into the V2 attack that devastated Calton Road in New Barnet killing twelve civilians on 20th January 1945 has also identified another local man who died whilst being held as a PoW by the Japanese; he was the husband of Alice Smeed, one of the civilians killed in the explosion. She would not have known that her husband was already dead:-

Signalman Joseph Robert Cecil Smeed Royal Corps of Signals aged 30; on 6th March 1944, place of death unknown. Remembered at the Yokohama War Cemetery, we have discovered no local memorial that remembers him by name.

OPERATION FRANKTON - CHIPPING BARNET'S 'COCKLESHELL' HERO

Operation Frankton was a daring commando raid in December 1942 targeting German cargo ships moored in the port of Bordeaux. Twelve men of the Royal Marine Boom Patrol Detachment set off in six collapsible canoes (nicknamed Cockles) from the submarine HMS Tuna in the Bay of Biscay to paddle up the Gironde river and mount the attack. It achieved some success but only two of them survived to tell the tale.

One of the men who did not return was Corporal Alfred Frederick Laver aged 22, from Barnet. Attempting escape across the Spanish Border after the raid he was one of several of the men captured, interrogated and then executed under the so-called 'Commando Orders' issued in October 1942 by the Wehrmacht under the direct order of Adolf Hitler.

Initially posted as missing, news of his death only reached his parents in August 1945, co-incidentally being reported in the Barnet Press editions of 18th and 25th of that month alongside their coverage of the local events that had marked Victory over Japan Day.

Corporal Laver's death is officially recorded as 23rd March 1943. Mentioned in Despatches, he is remembered on the Plymouth Naval Memorial and on memorial plaques placed on the waterfront in Merseyside and near to the mouth of the Gironde in France.

A tragic irony regarding his execution is that the 'Commando Order' was issued after raids involving the use of commandos had been launched by the British against Dieppe in the August and the Channel Island of Sark in the October of 1942; Corporal Laver was amongst the British Commandos who had survived the disastrous Allied amphibious raid on Dieppe.

'WORLD AT PEACE'

This was the strapline heading a lead article providing comment on the hard fought for and long awaited end of the fighting in the Second World War that appeared in the Barnet Press of 18th August 1945. The full text of the item is of interest and is reproduced below:-

"The day for which millions of people have yearned has come, and the world is at peace.

Cruel and treacherous Japan has gone the way of the other aggressor nations, and now suffers the ignominy of complete and utter defeat.

It has been remarked that our celebrations this week have, in the main, been less hilarious than those which marked the victory in Europe. It is understandable that they should be. While the first was a spontaneous outburst of a people freed from the dread of sudden death by rocket and flying bomb, our hearts, though joyful, give a big place today to deep and reverent thankfulness in the knowledge that the awful carnage is now at an end.

It is inevitable, too, that thought and imagination are occupied by the devastating power and awful possibilities of the atomic bomb, which brought so speedily the collapse of our last enemy.

Two roads now face us. The first leads to an era of unparalleled happiness and prosperity: the other goes straight to another war, in which devastation and slaughter will be so sudden and so frightful that civilisation could not survive.

It is for the people of the world to make their choice of path, for science can put them on either. Let us ever pray for, and work for, leaders who will direct the feet of the nations along the pathway of peace".

By 25th August the 'Letters to the Editor' columns had begun a debate that continues today - the positive vs negative view of international defence policies based on 'the nuclear option'.

A report that the Dean of St Albans had banned the use of the Abbey for a civic service of thanksgiving as he felt unable to give thanks to God for a victory won by the atomic bomb received counter argument from an Eighth Army veteran who cited the indiscriminate effects of the V1 & V2 and saturation bombing by the RAF as being no less essential in war.

The horrors of the 1914-18 war failed to prevent the 1939-45 conflict just twenty-one years later; whatever the causes behind those conflicts, the Chipping Barnet war memorial serves to remember the names of 424 men women and children of the town who made the ultimate sacrifice in achieving hard fought victories such as those marked by VE and VJ Day.

WE WILL REMEMBER THEM