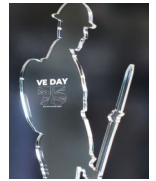


CHARING & DISTRICT LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

www.charinghistory.co.uk



CDLHS In Our Historic Times VE Day Memorial Supplement May 15th 2020



Charing in World War 2

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Many thanks to Peter Kent and Sarah Pearson for providing the CDLHS Oral History transcripts from the 1960s and 1980s recordings, which have been the basis for this supplement.

They have been such a valuable source of information for the History Society over the years. They give a real insight into life in Charing over many decades. Thankfully, the original recordings are now being digitised by Peter, to preserve them for the future.

The interviews were conducted by Mr & Mrs Ball, Mr Holman, Miss Stocker, Mrs Pauline Green and Mr John Hosking.

The interviewees were Mr & Mrs Chapman, Miss Machin, Miss Cadman, Mr Ralph Blake, Mrs Barbara Lloyd and Mr Harry Harrison.

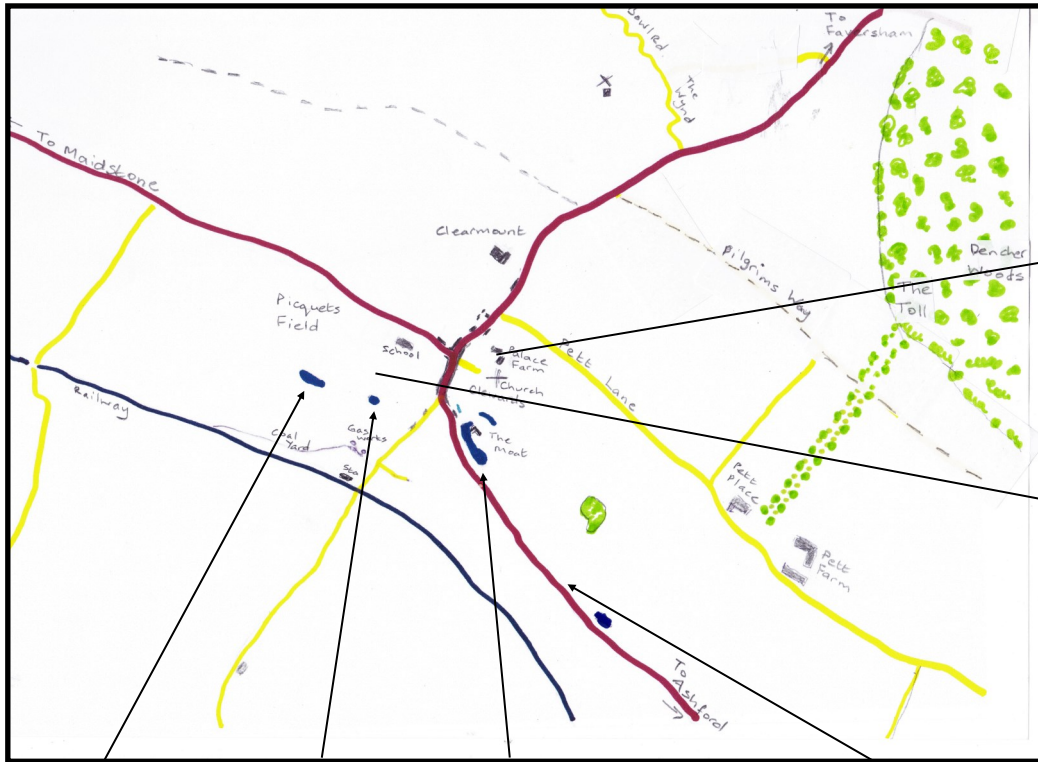
Other accounts were taken from The BBC People's War website and the REME website.



I have tried hard not to duplicate the extracts included in the CDLHS booklet 'Thanks for the Memories' published in 1992 by The Oral History Group of the time. It includes many memories from many different people on a whole range of topics. I believe there are just a few copies left price £2.

Valerie

Sketch map of Roads Charing Village pre-1926



Open fields; able to walk from the High Street up to the Bowl Road, and down to the railway and beyond.

Palace farm fields extended in both directions

Clewards, often boggy, cows grazing, younger children played games, football etc

Picquets: the village recreation ground visiting circus and fairs, fetes, Maypole dancing, cricket hockey and tennis. Older children played football there too.

Fishpond said to be the Monk's Fishpond.

Picquet Pond small enough for children to skate and parents walked round edge holding their hand

The Moat Popular for skating

Watercress beds from the bottom of Clewards, all along the brook to below Alderbeds

Village Ponds

Sketch map of Roads Charing Village 1926—1945

The 2 ponds in Picquets were filled in. The new road cut through Picquets. Cricket and tennis continued to be played there for a some years before moving to Pett. The Flower shows moved to The Moat, from Picquets.

Most villagers were relieved when the bypass was built, as motor traffic down the High Street lost control too often, and ended up either 'going into' what's now Wady & Brett, or Elizabeth House

At least 4 dairy farms Peirce Farm, Palace Farm, The Moat and Wickens

Colonel Groves put a notice to villagers on the gate when Moat Lake froze, and provided ropes and a ladders at the side for them. In the evenings villagers also skated by lantern light.



Charing Area During WW2

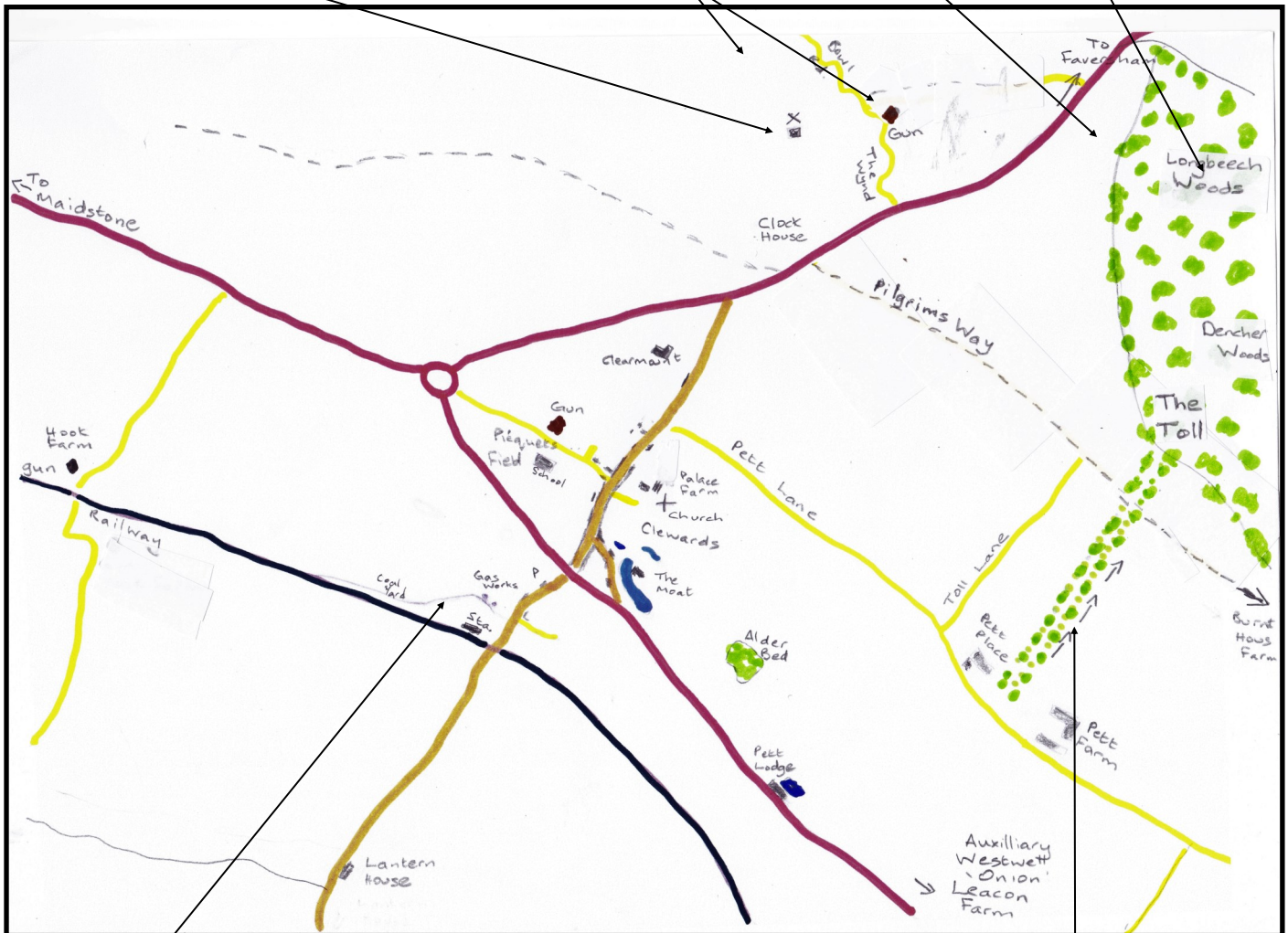
In this area could be the cattle trough disguising entry to the Aux. observation post that 'Monty' visited. Also Mr Monks' radio unit under a big chicken house on the poultry farm.

Messages received there were passed on, including by bus to Mr Hams at Molash.

Underground stores at the stables at Castlenau, and the windmill, among others.

(Based on information of Miss Cadman)

In the woods was the Prisoner of War camp, and approx. 50 tanks and personnel busy either on manoeuvres, or learning to strip down engines.



A special ramp was built to enable tanks to be loaded onto trains. Trains were camouflaged.

Drums of petroleum offloaded for the airforce depot at Egerton. (Many drums were found after the war in Moat Pond and around.)

Pett Place was requisitioned and used as a base for officers. Pett Farm was used as the cookhouse, all food provided and cooked by the army. Soldiers marched there three times a day, about 60 men sitting at a time.

16 guns were parked in the field in front of Pett Place. The tank route going backward and forwards to their base in the woods was using the camouflage provided by the avenue of lime trees from the garden of Pett Place. Sadly this destroyed the trees.

The village was a prohibited area and was surrounded by barbed wire. Pill boxes and blockhouses were at road and rail junctions.

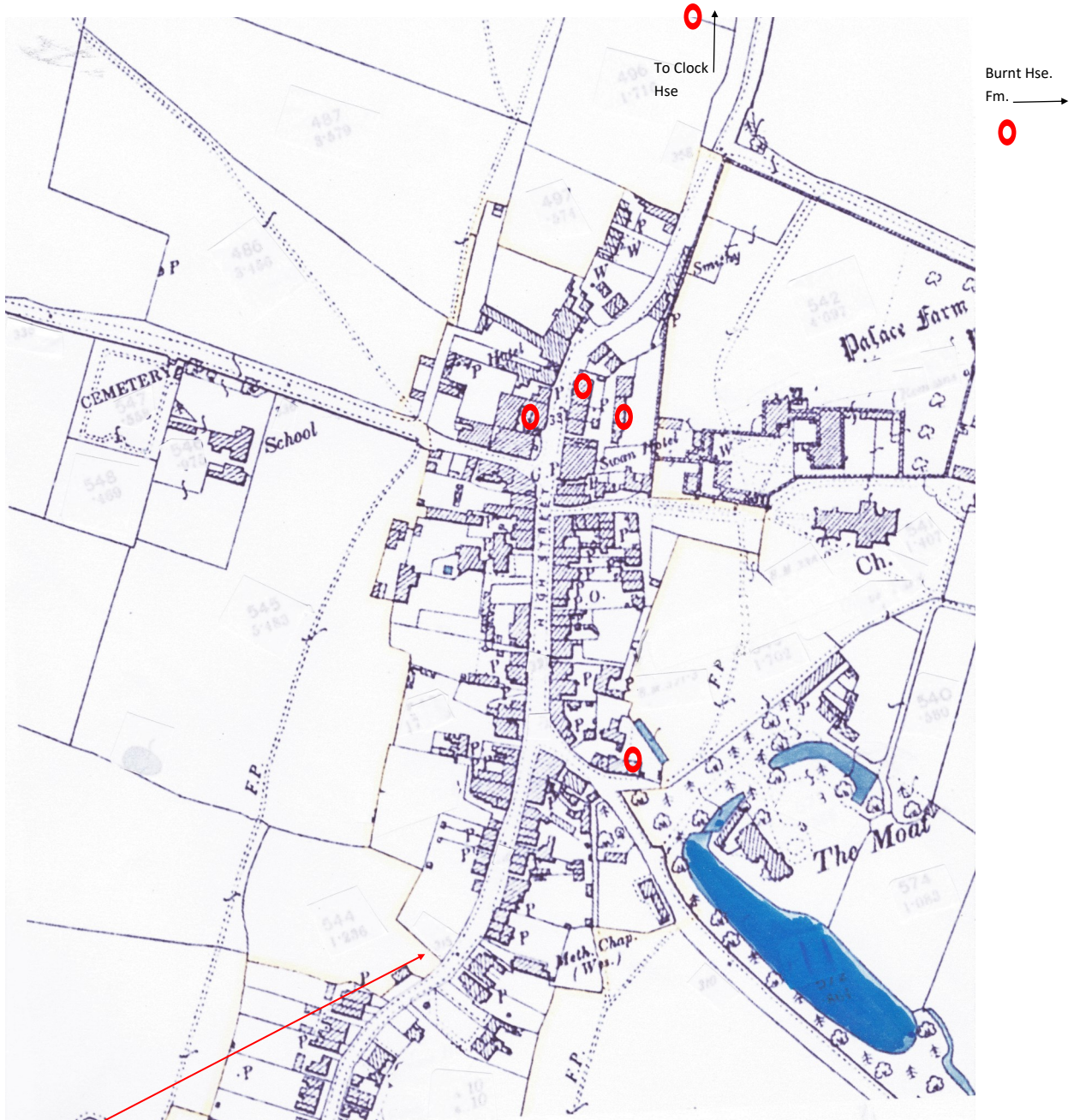
Bofurs, or 'Ack Ack' guns were said to be positioned at Hook farm, Castlenau and School Road, (opposite the school)!

The Village During WW2

"I've always remembered it as very pleasant place where everybody seemed to be so friendly to us. To be inundated with a lot of people in khaki for so long a period, it was strange that they accepted us as friends." *Harry Harrison*

○ Soldiers were known to be billeted at: Clock House, Burnt House Farm, The Swan annexe, Ludwell House, Willow Cottage.

Many soldiers would have been seen driving and marching up and down the High Street several times a day, either to Pett Farm to the cookhouse, or to the workshop in School Road.



The Parish Hall was a very popular, and multi-functional place. It was the NAAFI canteen; becoming well known in the neighbourhood for providing a good sandwich and a cup of tea. ("a cup of char and a wad") As well as the venue for ENSA concerts, WI plays and the Tank corps ran regular dances.

Both The Kings Head and The Queens Head pubs were open and used regularly by the soldiers.

Please see next page for information on School Rd and Market Place in enlargement of that area.

Fire Station moved here in later years of war.

Village sports field for football

The busy heart of the Village

A bofurs gun was positioned opposite the school. One day it caused plaster to fall off the ceiling onto the children's heads.

Eurocars garage was taken over by the army and became an army workshop.



Trenches dug as shelters for the children replaced the allotments. Later a proper concrete shelter was made between the school and the cemetery.

The Swan cellars were originally used as the official school shelter. The hotel was used for Officer's wives at weekends. The annexe at the back as a billet for L.A.D.

Market Place The air raid siren was here .

The small building, opposite the library, (now a garage) , continued to house the fire engine at the beginning of the war. Later moving to School Rd.

The sawmill and slaughter house in the Market Square continued to be busy.

All these sketch maps and diagrams have just been an attempt to collate my interpretation of information from several oral histories, so if you have contradictory, or additional information, please do let me know.

Thanks,

Valerie

(newsletter@charinghistory.co.uk)

The school trench shelters



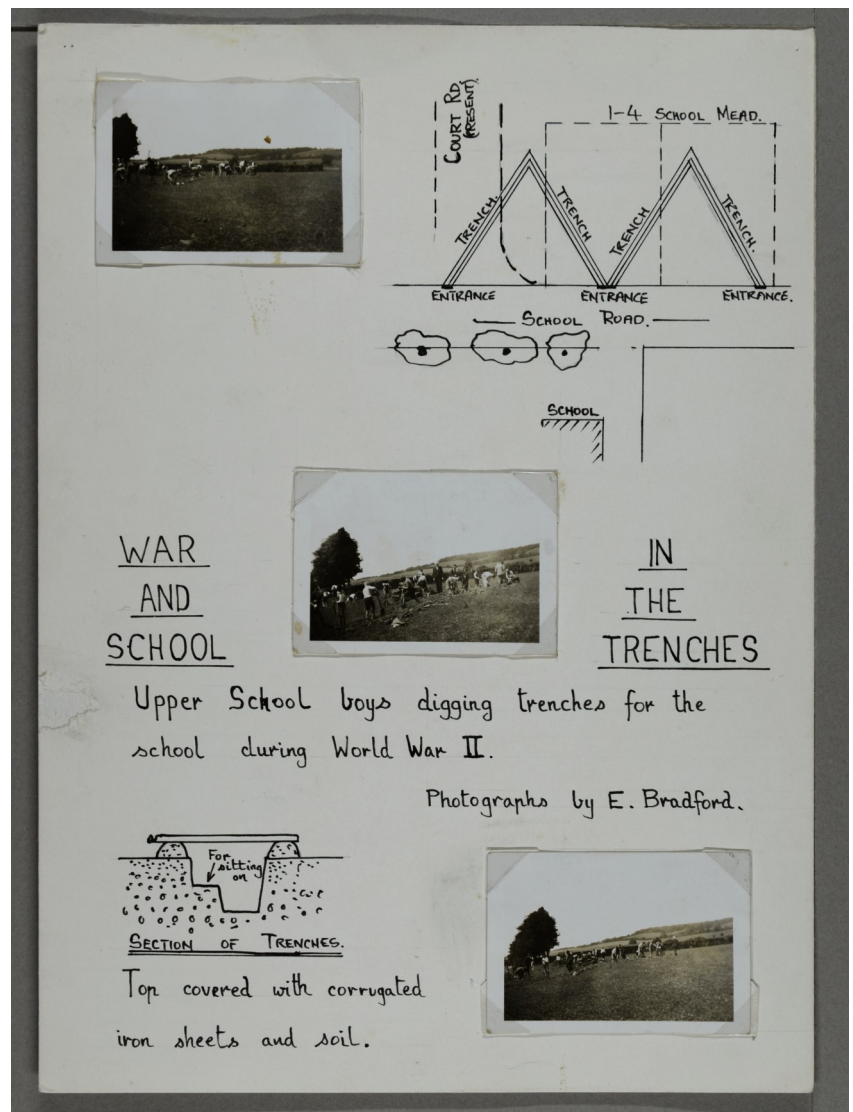
When Sylvia first sent this photo, showing the older children digging trenches opposite the school, I thought it contradicted an oral history memory, that the parents had dug the shelter.

However in another oral history account it mentions that some parents made a strong concrete shelter next to the school. So, both accounts complement each other.

What I'm not sure about is whether the Swan cellars were used before or after the dug out trenches.

A very useful record of the construction of the two trench shelters.

I hadn't heard of School Mead, or Court Road before



Thanks Sylvia for finding and sending these.

Also particular thanks to E Bradford and the writer.

Charing Memories of WW2

taken from Oral History recordings made in the 1980s

Impressions of Charing

"I was posted to a Squadron that was in a sleepy little village a few miles into the country from Charing. Oh, that countryside. It was so peaceful that even though we were serving in the army, it was incredible to know that there was the fiercest war ever being waged and that the whole of Britain was in immediate danger of being swamped by the Nazis.

We were surrounded by hop-fields and cherry orchards and during the cherry picking season we were able to find time to help the farmers to gather their harvest, thus being able to earn those much needed shillings as well as getting our fill of cherries. Happy days."

Greg Meredith stationed in Charing 9th batallion Royal tank regiment

Charing people



"I wish that I had never come. The first 5 years are the worst in Charing. Everybody knows more about you than you know yourself. I was supposed to be married, divorced and had a child, and I never even had a young man. Well, I liked them, but it was strange. You know what people are like. Some people are funny, I'm funny myself." "They wont let you mix with them. Charing people gave you that impression, that they are better than you, but they're not, because we all had to work damn hard.

Girls looked down on us Land Girls, but they didn't want to do it, they didn't want to soil their hands

Barbara Lloyd, nee Jarvis,

came to Charing as a Land Girl came to Kent age 21, then after the war stayed, and married.

A child's memories

Danger

"I do recall the day it all started. When you're kids you don't see any danger, and it's all a big thing; you're waiting for something to happen, and of course nothing does happen. This War was on -and we didn't know anything about it. Only when we went to school and knew that some of the fathers were being called up, and it wasn't until one heard about Dunkirk that things started happening."

(Mrs Blake) "The thing is you didn't know about all these things, during the war you weren't told anything. It was only what you gleaned by people talking in the village." *Ralph Blake*

National Salvage Campaign



"The other thing was everyone used to collect cannon shell lying around everywhere. 20mm canon shell, pieces of shrapnel, pieces of aircraft, all prize things in those days.

We used to collect paper, rags used to be collected. The building down the back of the village, in the back entrance behind Peirce House It was turned into a waste paper depot in the war and that's where we had to take all our books and papers and everything we could collect and metal at the time. They used to collect saucepans and all this"



Ralph Blake



By skill and fighting

Charing Memories of WW2 contd.

The Army in Charing and area

**“Apart from our unit,
the ninth battalion,
(Light Aid Detachment)
there were the R. E.
personnel and service
corps personnel. There
were quite a lot of Army
personnel in and around
Charing.....**



Everywhere
Faith and Glory Lead

“We were billeted in Charing in various spots , finally ending up at the annex of the Swan Hotel . We started at Clock House on the Canterbury Road, in a Nissen Hut behind Clock House. We then moved after a short stay there, down to Ludwell House in the High Street. After a short time there we were then transferred to the annex of the Swan Hotel , where we spent most of our time when we stayed in Charing. All the L.A. D.” 1942 –1944 *Harry Harrison L.A.D.*

“The Regiment consisted of anything between 8 or 9 hundred men. They were scattered around A lot of the troops were under canvas in Pett Park. The Officers were in Pett Place, The signallers were billeted in one of the bungalows up here (up hill) as you go up on the right hand side. We went up to Clock House to sleep, but did all our exercises at Pett mostly empty rooms. I never remember any furniture.

When we first came to Charing and moved into the various houses, and my lot were all put into Wickens, We were barely there a hour, and were all hustled out again, because it was a listed building, they were afraid the Army was going to spoil it, Someone high up pulled a few strings and we were all pulled out again, to Clock House. The floors all sloped down to the corners,The Army had priority over everything, so there must have been some real reason for it.....

....The field in front of Pett Place, that was an R. A. Regiment and there were 16 guns parked up there. We used to have to go out in those fields to practise. We had to learn how to dig gun pits. The tanks came after us. We used to go up into the chalk pit for small arms practice.”

Mr Stone stationed at Charing July, 1942

“ I used to board them. I to had work six down. They used to work at the depot. We used to sit round the table at night playing Newmarket. Well you couldn't do anything else. Then I had the land Girls. I had a beautiful letter from Megan Lloyd George thanking me for looking -after the men. “
Mrs T (Towner?)



Charing Memories of WW2 contd

The Tanks at Longbeech Woods

Tanks crushed the 'magnificent avenue of lime trees that went from the garden of Pett Place to the Pilgrims Way'

"Every day, except Sundays was spent in the tank park near Charing.

Looking back it is quite amazing how we could be kept busy day after day doing routine maintenance of the tanks, but it was through this that we became so familiar with the workings of them. After a few weeks each driver was fully capable of stripping down the four carburettors, reassembling and synchronising them one with another. The ignition was always a bit awkward. Looking after a twelve-cylinder engine, each cylinder having two spark plugs that in turn were fed by two distributors. These of course had to be synchronised, one with the other..... It is interesting to note that when we first started to drive the Churchill we were told that the gears were so difficult to select that we should not expect to get a 'Clean' change. Within a few months of handling them not only could we effect clean changes, most of us were able to change gear cleanly without using the clutch! That was just one of the silly tricks which we developed to relieve the monotony."

Greg Meredith

(stationed in Charing 9th battalion Royal tank regiment)

"The full strength of the Battalion I believe was 50 tanks, that is 50 Churchills apart from what we call the Recce Troop which were American Honey and then the intercom troop had Humber Scouts for their reconnaissance The Recce Troop was based round Pett Place .

They only did short drives on the road really, if they had any work done on them they would go out onto the main Canterbury Road and do a test run. They never took part in any exercises on those roads . Eventually they went on one big scheme called Tiger scheme, which covered quite a big area of Kent, including quite a number of units from Kent; it was manoeuvres .

It was all fairly routine. I wouldn't say that it was humdrum as a training battalion. As we were we were still getting used to the vehicles and the tanks, and there was quite a lot of work to do. Most days we spent working in the tank park, and at weekends. This made the job interesting you see Well we knew that sometime in the future something would happen, but as is always the case the private and the trooper knows very little about it until the thing actually happens." *(left for Normandy) Harry Harrison L.A.D.*

"Oh yes, we had the tank corps in Longbeech wood and they had these horrible trenches so that when the tank wanted something doing to it, they used to get down in the trench and do it. They were left after the war and were ever so dangerous, they filled with leaves and got water in. A child drowned on one on Hothfield Common. We did try to filling them ourselves, but it was hopeless. We wrote to the army first, they said it was someone elses job, I suppose the council, but they didn't want to know. I suppose they gradually did fill up, but they were rather nasty." *Miss Cadman*

"I remember being on Hart Hill when the Regiment tanks were here. I was walking with the dog, and I had to literally climb right up the bank. I was terrified. An enormous tank; there was no room for anybody on the road at all, You had . to scramble up the bank I would imagine they didn't see us, though there was no room to swerve anyway, they just had to keep going." *Mrs Stone*

Charing in WW2 contd

Happenings

Prisoners of war

"We had the tanks, and on the opposite side we had a prisoner of War Camp, just opposite as you go round into the Canterbury Road, on the opposite side. Some of them were Italians, and German, they were country men, very hard workers, One of them came to work on the farm We Liked him very much. He was a real countryman."

Q "Did the girls in the village fraternise with them at all?"

A "I don't know about the prisoners, they did with the tank corps." *Miss Cadman*

Bombs

".....But they were dropping bombs around here. we had string of bombs dropped just below, in front of Pett in the field, they didn't really do much damage round here, they dropped probably two or three incendiaries round here, round the limeworks, and I've picked two or three up the next morning, took all the stuff out. Oh yes one came through the house here, in the dairy, other side of the wall here. Its -a workshop now," *Ralph Blake*

"I used to get in the chicken house, underneath the dropping boards. I don't think it would have been much use if one had come down. When the bomb dropped on the church at Little Chart, that flying bomb, my mother and my aunt were in the kitchen at the back they didn't seem to know much about it, but the rush of air took the front door off. It (the wind) went up the stairs and when it came back out of the house it pulled the grandfather clock over on the landing and smashed it. But at that distance I wouldn't have thought it would have blown the front door off. it was quite common to see our aeroplanes bring one down and I always knew if they put one out of action ahead of us that we would get it," *Mr Hills*

"The doodle bugs were the worst. You couldn't see' them, but you could hear them coming, used to come like that and like that. It seemed the middle had left. We did hear them coming that way. We used to sit up in bed and listen to them -look out of the window sometimes, but you couldn't see anything. Wait for it too. It was frightening." *Miss Feakin and Mrs Murray*

"Doodlebugs did *go* over, I was with my mother in Ashford and it was a shattering sound, quite numb you feel, it just missed the market, Canterbury was badly bombed. I remember that night (1/6/1942)...you could see the flames from home, " *Miss Cadman*

Newlands

"I lived with Mrs Hayward. She walked the floor and we used to sleep. She used to say, you will be killed in your bed. Her husband said, if we have got to die we might just as well die in our beds as walking the roads. We saw the one that came down on Newlands on the Army Camp. It was sad, we had been dancing with some of them the night beforeit was in the early morning. We could see them come down and once that engine stopped it turned ." *Barbara Lloyd nee Jarvis, Land Army*

Newlands Manor Tragedy

From the REME archives

On 24 June 1944 a VI flying bomb was shot down by the RAF over Charing Heath in Kent, one of many launched by the Germans against London over that period. The missile fell on billets housing men of 6 (Guards) Tank Brigade Workshop REME, killing 52 men and wounding some 40 others. At the time, the brigade workshop was preparing tanks and vehicles for the upcoming battle in North-West Europe and that one blow eliminated one third of the unit strength, many of them highly skilled and experienced craftsmen.



Tank and men, Newlands

An extract from the war diary of 6 Guards Tank Brigade Workshop REME for the period 1 May 1944 to 22nd July, 1945 working in France, held by the REME Museum, describes the events at the time:

1 May — Workshop moved from Carlton Hall, near Worksop to a staging camp at Stevenage.

2 May — Unit divided into groups and escorted by the Metropolitan Police to Eltham, where they formed a convoy to move to Newlands Stud Farm at Charing Heath, Kent.

3 May — Workshop operational at Charing Heath. The B vehicle repair section and general trades were accommodated under cover in a large flat-roofed riding school; the tank repair section, recovery section and RAOOC Stores Section functioned in the surrounding open spaces. The soldiers



2 similar Nissen huts

were accommodated in Nissen huts in the orchard behind the riding school; the WOs and Sergeants occupied a farmhouse, and the officers a small cottage.

22 May — Workshop inspected by Commander 6th Guards Tank Brigade. 8 June (at night) — the first sighting of what was later confirmed as a German VI (Flying Bomb), which was shot down and landed in a residential area in Maidstone.



Newlands Farmhouse taken about 1900

10 June — Start of a concerted attack by V Is, which came over in flights of three at about 10 minute intervals day and night, with the RAF and USAF doing their best to shoot them down — the Workshop was directly under the flight path.

17 June — Workshop placed on 6 hours' notice to move. All vehicles and equipment waterproofed for wading up to a depth of 4 feet.

23 June — Workshop received orders to move to a staging area in woods near Wickham on 26 June to await embarkation at Gosport.

Newlands Tragedy contd.

'At 6am on 24 June 1944 a V1 bomb landed in the workshop area. It caused untold damage. Out of 244 men, 46 REME soldiers from the workshop were killed outright. There were 80 wounded, including 40 seriously, 6 of whom subsequently died of their wounds. It also destroyed 7 Nissen huts, the QM stores and an office hut.

The following was subsequently written by Brigadier Gough:

"It was a beautiful sunny morning and there was no need for us to jump out of bed on Reveille. I was in the stables, used as a washroom, shaving, when I heard a noise, looked up and saw a doodlebug coming towards us. It was being shot at from behind by a fighter-bomber. I started shouting, "Take cover, take cover". Then it hit the camp. The bomb struck the corner of a Nissen hut housing the soldiers. The blast took me off my feet. I picked myself up and wandered round where the camp was and it had all disappeared. The huts were all mangled together. There were blokes bombed to pieces, ripped apart. For security reasons it was decreed that it should be an active service burial in a mass grave in the cemetery of the nearby village of Lenham. The grave was dug during the day by Guardsmen of Scots, Grenadiers and Coldstreams.

At night by lantern light the burial took place. Each soldier was wrapped in their blanket, those who could be identified had a label attached, with their number, rank and name. The names were recorded and placed in a sealed bottle which was placed under a wooden cross."

Continuing the war diary of 6 (Guards) Tank Brigade Workshop REME

24 June (0600 hours) — V1 shot down by the RAF bounced off the flat roof of the riding school and landed amongst the Nissen huts. Casualties: 46 killed and six died of wounds; one officer and 20 other ranks seriously wounded; seven Nissen huts destroyed; and damage to 14 vehicles and 16 motorcycles.

24 June — Orders received to conduct an active service burial of the dead for reasons of security. A mass grave was dug in Lenham village cemetery during daylight hours. Burial of the dead was conducted at night by lantern light — Capt Cliff Gough (Second-in-Command) and WOI (ASM) Humm recorded the exact placement of the bodies on a plan, a copy of which was sealed in a bottle and placed under a wooden cross after the grave had been filled in.

25 June (Sunday) — Burial Service in the presence of GOC District and Brigade Commander.

26 June — Jewish Burial Service for Cfn Lazarus conducted by a local rabbi.

It has been said that the injured men were taken to the nearest military hospital, which was at Leeds Castle, but were turned away because the hospital was only for officers. Some of the injured who died may have done so because they had to travel further before receiving proper treatment.

After the Newlands Tragedy

At the time the episode was hushed up, probably both for security and morale reasons. Preparations for D-day had to continue and by 29 June the workshop had received 76 reinforcements and on 17 July was ordered to proceed to Gosport for embarkation.



Loading a tank, Newlands

After landing on the Normandy coast, it travelled and to near the village of Esquay-sur-Seulles, east of Bayeaux. By the

22nd July the Workshop had been assembled and played a full part in the subsequent Allied operations.

Despite the secrecy news of the tragic event, though not the extent of the damage reached 'Bill' in Normandy. He later wrote "it seems unbelievable with all that expanse of green fields all around that odd, small but well-occupied, location should receive a direct hit. Causing so many casualties."

Following the war, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission took charge of the massed burial site in the corner of Lenham Cemetery and erected 52 headstones to record the names of those killed.

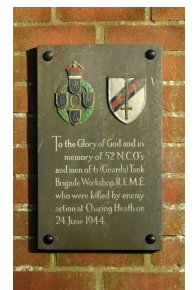


In 1963 the Committee of Management of the REME Association decided that a permanent memorial should be erected at Lenham and suggested to the Lenham Parish Council that this might take the form of memorial gates for the cemetery. This suggestion was accepted.



Dedication of the gates by Reverend KG Till

On Sunday 29 November 1964 a Service of Commemoration was held in Lenham village church of St Mary's attended by the Representative Colonel Commandant (Major General R. B. Stockdale) and DEME (Major General L. H. Atkinson). At the conclusion of the church service a parade, led by the REME Staff Band, marched through the village to the cemetery. At the cemetery General Stockdale unveiled the memorial tableau on the gates. There followed the dedication of the



Close up of memorial on left gate post.

gates by the Reverend K. G. Till.

Each year this tragic event is remembered at Lenham Church with 133 Workshop Company. There is also a service held at the burial site on 11th November (or nearest Sunday).

It is recorded that on that day at Newlands, the REME Corps suffered the 'largest single loss of life'. This is still true today.

In 2018 a Memorial plaque was unveiled at Newlands Chapel



Note:

The white chalk cross on the Downs above Lenham, was constructed in 1922 as a war memorial to the fallen in the First World War.



Postscript

This supplement began as a short article based on some oral history (OH) transcripts. However, as you may have realised, with lots of time on my hands, I've enjoyed reading and re-reading the OH, and 'they've sent me off' to follow things up in many directions. One thing led to another, then another, and so on, and I've tried to put them together and make sense of them.

It is only now that my deadline is overdue that I am stopping, (and without managing to include Little Chart church, as I'd originally intended).

The next newsletter will be brief!

Thanks must go to Kevin for his patience and support, as well as proof reading (no time for Keith and Francesca!)

If the VE Day newsletter edition has sparked a war time memory, or story, please let me know, (it doesn't have to be of Charing).

As said last time, CDLHS sadly has no photos of VE celebrations in Charing, but we feel there must be some, somewhere. If you have a photo, please could we copy it, or if you know something, please let us know.

Peter, Sarah and I are hoping that it won't be long before we can resume collecting oral histories for 'Charing Lives'.

If you're interested in helping, or can suggest someone who might be, please let us know. Sometimes people think they haven't anything significant to contribute, but 'little snippets put together create a big picture'. Please, don't say "no", if you're asked.

Until next time,

Stay well,

Valerie

newsletter@charinghistory.co.uk



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