

Civilian Organisations in the Village.

For descriptions of Lakenheath in wartime we recommend the contributions of Robert Kidner, Ken Turner, J C Morley and Marie Laflin in 'Times Remembered'.

By 1938 preparations for war had been accelerated despite Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's efforts for peace and industries were being reorganised to produce essential armaments and equipment. The protection of the non-combatant population was being pursued urgently and was very much at the forefront of preparations for war nationally. The war was expected to begin with the bombing of cities leading to serious disruption of civil organisation and to every-day life. It was understood that the war would threaten the civilian population as well as those serving in the armed forces and it was vital not only to protect the lives of people, both physically and socially, but to ensure that essential wartime industries be able to function effectively and that the food supply was controlled. This was the battle of the 'Home Front' and the whole of the population was expected to play their part throughout the war.



'Yes, Our Work is War Work'.

© IWM Art. IWM PST 14409. Imperial War Museum

Men between the ages of 18-41 had to register for service in the armed forces at the very beginning of the war, and in 1941 all unmarried women/widows between the ages of 20- 30 became liable for 'call up'.

www.parliament.uk

The rapid expansion of the armed forces seriously reduced police and fire services manpower which before 1938 were generally organised by county and municipal authorities rather than nationally. Men above 'call up' age served as special constables, firemen or air raid wardens, and many women were recruited into the Woman's Land Army, or, if they could drive, into the Ambulance Service as drivers. Women also provided a very large work force in armaments and engineering factories. Older single women and mothers of younger children often served in the Women's Voluntary Service, staffing respite centres in towns and cities caring for victims of bombing.

They ran the 'British Restaurants' and were involved with the re-location of evacuees from towns and cities. In Lakenheath we know that WVS members supervised the placing of evacuees, ran a canteen and provided refreshments for the Home Guard and travelling servicemen.

'Reserved occupations' were those considered essential for the war effort and so people working in them were not liable for military service but many still 'joined up'. Amongst reserved occupations for instance, were agricultural workers many of whom served in the Home Guard and other voluntary organisations like the Fire Service. Almost everyone was expected to do something for the 'war effort': quite often this was an awful lot! Most gave their time willingly but a degree of persuasion was available if necessary! Ken Turner sums it up well:

*"In wartime no one was allowed to be idle, persistent dodgers were sent to work for the **War Ag. or risked the penalty of perhaps a month in Norwich Prison."*

**Ch 8. Civilian Volunteers. "Life in Lakenheath" in 'Times Remembered'. Ken Turner.*

*** War Agricultural Executive Committees*

1. The Lakenheath Platoon of The Home Guard.

2nd Cambridge and Suffolk Battalion, Home Guard.



The Lakenheath Platoon of the Home Guard.

This photograph, probably from 1944, was taken in Camping Close just before the Home Guard was 'stood down'.

Left to right.

- Back Row** 1 Richard Horne. 2 Frederick Leader. 3 Richard Gathercole. 4 Charles Palmer. 5 Harold Smith. 6 Percival Wilderspin. 7 Sydney Brown. 8 John Turrington. 9 Ambrose Flack. 10 Vic Rolph. 11 *Karl Wehsley. 12 Jack Cox. 13 Thomas Sutton. 14 Jock Morley. 15 John Brown.
- Row 2** 1 Charles Rutterford. 2 Ike Bennett. 3 Joseph Rutterford. 4 *Fritz Wehsley. 5 Frank Killingsworth. 6 Ebenezer Turrington. 7 George Sutton. 8 Arthur Matthews. 9 Belangie (Fred) Butcher. 10 John Skitrell. 11 George Shinkins. 12 Samuel Olley. 13 'Ozzy' Rolph. 14 Joseph Smith. 15 Stanley Flack. 16 Charles Morley. 17 Alfred Horn.
- Row 3** 1 Frank Fincham. 2 Arthur Presland. 3 Septimus Horrex. 4 Albert Sitford. 5 Cyril Brown. 6 Ernest Morley. 7 William Crane. 8 Harold (Herbert?) English. 9 Leslie Allsop. 10 Charles Ross. 11 Lewis Chapman. 12 Frank Horrex. 13 Arthur Smith. 14 Bill Hensby. 15 Thomas Rutterford.
- Front Row** 1 Harold Bacon. 2 William Mackender. 3 Arthur Cuthbert. 4 Ivor Bennett. 5 Frank Morley. 6 Alan Wortley. 7 Mark King. 8 William Gipp. 9 Lawrence Baker. 10 Archibald Curtiss. 11 Edward Brown. 12 Robert Newell.

**Karl and Fritz were German Jewish refugees.*

The majority of the names were supplied by Mrs. Curtis in Lakenheath History. Vol 3. 2000. Silverlock.

The Local Defence Volunteers (LDV), soon renamed the Home Guard, was formed in May 1940, as a national response to the danger of invasion. East Anglia was considered a high invasion risk and there is evidence that members of the Lakenheath HG were mobilised during an invasion scare on Saturday 7th September 1940 **.

Throughout the war Home Guard units were the first line of defence against enemy parachutists who might be dropped in remote areas like the Brecks and Fens to act as spies. It was not unusual that they captured German airmen who had been shot down.

Many local agricultural workers and others joined the Home Guard together with veterans from WW1 and some young men not yet old enough for the armed forces also joined.

***Ted Matthews in Lakenheath History. Vol 3. 2000. Silverlock.*

After a fairly chaotic beginning nationally the village Home Guard received regular training, often taking part in operational exercises with the Brandon platoon and also guarding strategically important sites in the area such as the Wilton Bridge over the Little Ouse.

To begin with HG members were volunteers and normal army ranks were not used but in 1941 army ranks were introduced and Lakenheath had an official Commanding Officer, Lt. Herbert English, who was probably promoted later in the war to the rank of Captain. Veterans of WW1 provided the NCO's at the beginning but later younger men were promoted.

Local doctors acted as Company Medical Officers and the WVS supplied meals and sometimes accommodation during training exercises. In Lakenheath, because there were few telephones in the village, orders from Battalion HQ were sent by phone to Sir Charlton Briscoe at the Hall and were relayed to the platoon by a runner.

The Commanding Officer was Captain Herbert, Robert, George, English. 1900-1973.



Herbert English in Methwold.

Herbert English was born in 1900 at 5, Laundry Lane, Lowestoft in a home which he shared with his grandmother, aunt May, his widowed mother and his sister, Lily. He was in the army in India until at least 1920 with the rank of lance corporal. In 1925 he married Nora May Colby who lived in Blundeston near Lowestoft. The National Registration of 1939 shows him living at 2 North Road, Mildenhall (Lakenheath was part of Mildenhall RDC) with his wife Nora and a lodger, Frederick Badcock, who was a farm horseman. He was described as a 'Foreman Baker/bread and cakes', and was working here as the Co-op head baker in ***1936. After the war he continued in that position. I have heard a story that during the war he regularly wore his officers' side arm at work and on occasions set up tin cans in the Co-op yard for target practice! Nora's National Identity Card shows her living in Methwold in 1948.

****In 1936 he discovered a break-in at the Co-op which was reported in detail in the local press.*

Family research: Michael Tuffs. Biographical detail and photo from family documents loaned by Mr. and Mrs. Dan Howard.



The Officers and NCOs Lakenheath Home Guard.

Back Row Cyril Brown. Ernie Morley. Harry Bacon. Joe Smith. Charlie Morley. Bob Newel. Mark King. Frank Fincham.
Front Row Albert Sitford. Lewis Chapman. Charlie Ross. Bill Crane. Herbert English. Les Allsop. Arthur Smith.
 Frank Horrex. Tom Rutterford.

The Lakenheath platoon was about 60 strong. Amongst the men were five from Undley, and seven or eight from Sedge Fen. Most interestingly the company included two German Jewish refugees named Karl and Fritz Wehsley who with other refugees worked at the Chivers Farm on Sedge Fen.

Karl gave a moving public tribute to the country and the Home Guard at the final parade of the platoon in Newmarket in 1948. For the newspaper report please see the [‘Chivers Estate story’](#).

Training.

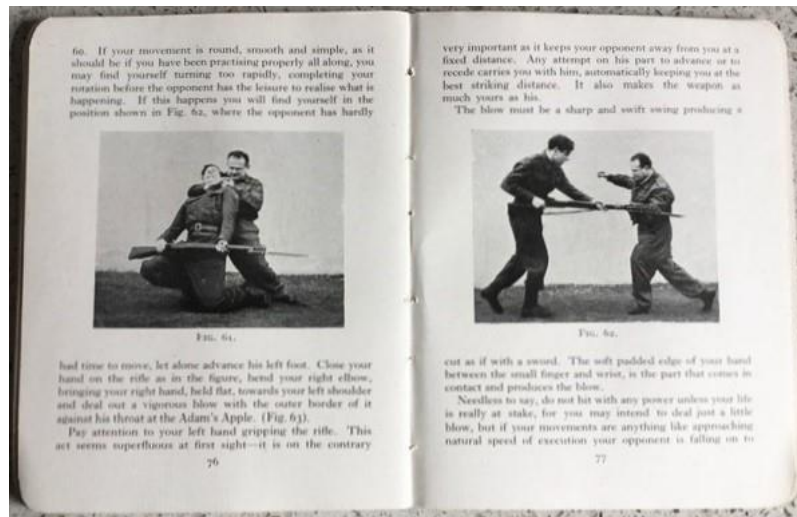
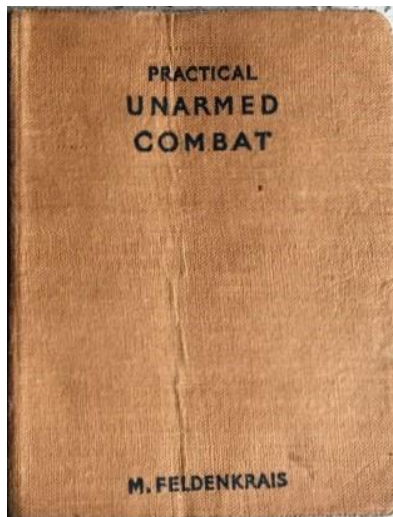
Training took place on Sundays, quite often all day and in all weathers, and indoor training took place in the original British Legion hut which is still visible amongst the various later extensions. The scout hut, which was then roughly opposite St. Mary’s Church, was also used. Outdoor training took place in a variety of places, often on Camping Close or the Warren, with rifle training being on the range at Thetford. There was at least one ‘mock battle’ against the Brandon Platoon. It has to be said that things didn’t always go to plan.

“On one occasion a section was to attack the ‘Fox’ public house in Back Street- guarded by another section. Being unable to find the ‘enemy’ they looked in the bar- to find them drinking there!”

and,

“During training ‘thunderflashes’ were normally thrown to simulate grenades. Due to a shortage of these Zeph Gathercole devised his own version. Having bought a barrel of gunpowder at Jonah Rolph’s farm sale he filled empty 12 bore cartridges cases with the black powder after removing the primer cap and placing a fuse in the cap hole in the base. He then made a suitable hole in a large potato and inserted the cartridge. Before throwing this splendid ‘grenade’ the fuse was lit with a cigarette. Apparently, these were used with effect against a startled Brandon HG, however the practice had to be stopped owing to the danger from flying fragments of brass cartridge base!”

From ‘Lakenheath History’. Roy Silverlock, 2000.



In 1942 this was a well-known self-defence manual used by Home Guard platoons.

Donated by Jeffery Serjeant

On Duty.

Roy Silverlock was unable to find out very much about the activities of the platoon. It seems that, unlike many platoons which were based near towns, they did not carry out regular guard duties of important installations. (The airfields were guarded by the RAF regiment). They did however establish defensive positions at both ends of the village which had circular 'fire points' 6 ft. high constructed of sand bags as well as on the Warren. It's not known how often these were manned but Ted Matthews spent a night on duty in one with two other men in the invasion scare of September 1940.

Roy Silverlock ends his study with:

"Whilst there was a certain element of 'Dad's Army' in the Lakenheath Home Guard -as in every village HG- especially at the beginning- it must be remembered that these men gave up much of their spare time for unpaid service, (as did those in other services- the Civil Defence and Fire Service, the Observer Corps, and by no means least the WVS,) and by the latter part of the war formed as an efficient a unit as they could with the weapons and equipment available to them, whose members, when called upon for action would no doubt have given of their best- as did their families in the regular Services- witness the Lakenheath War Memorial".

The Lakenheath Home Guard was stood down on 1st November 1944 when there was no further risk of invasion.

Much of the information in this story was gathered by Roy Silverlock in conversation with Ron Mackender, Ted Matthews and Harry Palmer, all one-time members of the Lakenheath Platoon.

2. The Lakenheath Auxiliary Observation Unit: The British Resistance.

It has been confirmed that there was a small secret band of men in our village who had been selected to disappear 'underground' to act as a resistance unit in the event of a successful invasion. Darren Norton, researcher and producer of the Brandon At War web site (see below) has established that Lakenheath men were part of the Brandon Auxiliary Unit under the command of Capt. Walter G Gentle MC. MBE. who it is believed had a butchers business in Brandon.

A secret Observation Base (OB) was prepared in a remote place which provided a 'hide' from which resistance operations could be carried out. The OB would have had hidden entrance and emergency exits and was equipped with bunks and a small spirit stove, with stocks of tinned food and water sufficient for a few days. Armaments and explosives were also stored there.

Les Rutterford, who was a member of the Lakenheath Home Guard as a youth, has said that sometime after the war the Lakenheath OB was discovered in an area known as Brandon Fields between Lakenheath Station and Brandon but this has not been confirmed and the passage of time makes confirmation now unlikely.

Auxiliaries were given special forces (commando) training including bomb making and sabotage techniques as well as silent killing methods and assassination planning which took place at Coleshill House near Swindon. They were required to sign the Official Secrets Act which ensured complete secrecy. So much so that the existence of these groups remained generally unknown until the 1980's. Many former members did not divulge their membership to anyone outside their OB group even into their old age, such was the importance placed on secrecy. Later, when the danger of invasion had receded some auxiliaries were recruited into the now famous, SOE (Special Operations Executive) such was their competence. Some 'joined up' like Henry Smith who became a sergeant instructor in the RAF and others resumed their normal life.

Note: There is a great deal of information about the Auxiliary Units on-line. Here are three I found very useful. The Covid 19 pandemic prevented a visit to the Parham Airfield Museum.

www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories

www.parhamairfieldmuseum.co.uk/british-resistance-organisation

<http://www.brandonatwar.co.uk/>

Darren Norton

The Lakenheath Auxiliaries OB.

The seven men who formed the Lakenheath OB unit have been identified by Darren Norton from the archives at the British Resistance Organisation based at Parham Airfield Museum.

Further research by Ken Turner has established from the *1939 National Register that six of these men lived within one and a half miles of the Wilton Bridge over the Little Ouse. The seventh, Reg Young was not in the village in 1939. We think he came here in 1940, having purchased Christmas Hill Farm. All of these addresses are placed some distance from the possible OB hide referred to earlier.

*See Timeline 6 for more about the 1939 National Register.

In 1940 Les Rutterford encountered a group of men. Ken Turner remembers:

*"Les Rutterford, my older cousin, was a member of Lakenheath Home Guard on guard duty with Pvt. Thomas Rutterford and Pvt. Bill Mackender at the Wilton Bridge on a dark wet night when he was met by a group of men armed with some kind of **machine gun, one of whom he recognised as Henry Smith".*

***The gun was likely to be a Sten gun, a cheaply made and effective British sub-machine gun.*

Members of the Lakenheath Auxiliary OB unit.

Frederick A Crowther.	Living at: New House Farm, Station Road.
Sgt. Hector W Crocker.	Christmas Hill Farm, Station Road.
Alva E Rolph.	A farm just off the still to be made Wangford Road.
S W Rolph (brother of Alva).	Ditto.
George Palfrey.	Calledge Farm, Station Road.
Henry H W Smith.	Hiss Farm. Station Road.
Reginald H J Young.	Christmas Hill Farm. (From 1940).

It's noticeable that these men were all living within a mile of each other, well outside the pre-war edge of the village, but far enough away from Brandon Fields to allow secrecy. At the time the village ended more or less at the gates of The Hall on Station Road which were known as the 'plumb pudding gates' because of the shape of the gate-post finials.

Subsequently Henry Smith became Chair of Lakenheath Parish Council and the last private owner of Lakenheath Hall, formerly 'The Retreat'.

As far as we know there are no available photographic, newspaper or Imperial War Museum posters from the time and it may be significant that none of these men are in the photograph of the Lakenheath Home Guard, maybe following the stringent security requirements of the Official Secrets Act. As has been said, it was absolute policy that these OB's and the auxiliaries who formed the units were kept secret, not only from their families, but also local Home Guard Units and that this secrecy was maintained long after the war. Only in 1996 was the existence of the Auxiliaries recognised and surviving members awarded the Defence Medal.

3. The Women's Land Army.

The agricultural depression of the 1920's and early 30's resulted in serious financial problems for farming and was one cause of the under-farming and neglect of agricultural land in the Lakenheath Fen. The prospect of war and the consequent likelihood of food shortages made urgent the maximisation of the country's food producing potential by all possible means, but this was seriously hampered by the reduction in farm labour due largely to the conscription of farm workers into the armed forces. Such was the urgency of the situation that some poorly run farms were taken over by the War Agricultural Executive Committee, (or War Ag. as it was known). Christmas Hill Farm near Lakenheath Station was one such farm.

To resolve the chronic labour shortage the Women's Land Army, (WLA), was reformed in June 1939, having already been in existence in 1917. In 1941 it had 20,000 volunteers.



For a Happy, Healthy Job.....

© IWM Art. IWM PST 6078. Imperial War Museum.

"Back to the Land, we must all lend a hand. To the farms and the fields we must go. There's a job to be done, though we can't fire a gun we can still do our bit with the hoe"

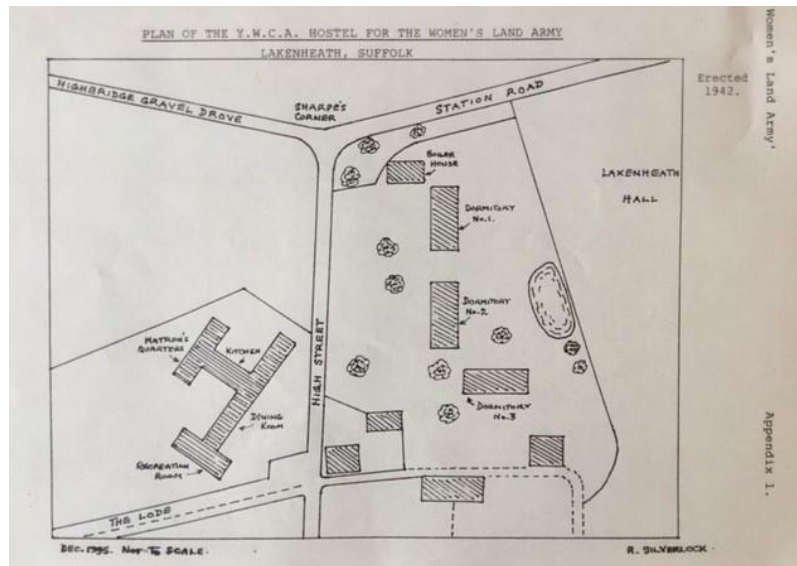
WLA song. From WW2 People's War. bbc.co.uk

It was so important that the Fen was productive that what was to be the largest hostel in the country was built in 1942 to house the 120 Land Army girls who came mainly from London and the North of England. Girls were also housed by farmers, or billeted in local villages. *In March 1941 the girls were paid £1.12.0 (£1.60) for a 48 hour week if they were living in the hostel. If they lived on the farm, board and lodging was free, and the wage was 16 shillings or 80p per week, the wages being paid by the farmers. Some overtime was possible but late payment of wages was not unusual as the farmers received the money from the state and then paid the girls.

**Womenslandarmy.co.uk*

Silverlock. Lakenheath History Topics. Vol 1, 1994-97.

The Hostel



Drawn by Roy Silverlock in 1994 for Lakenheath History Topics Vol 1

Note: Until the digging of the Relief Channel (1962-63) there was a branch channel from the main Lakenheath Lode which Silverlock labels 'The Lode' on his plan. This was behind the Half Moon pub and was known as 'Yards End' in earlier times.



Part of the Land Army Hostel, site now occupied by Quayside Court.

Photographs taken from the Group Archive

The hostel was administered by a Matron who was responsible for the running of the hostel, including discipline. There were two cooks and two kitchen maids and there was also a caretaker.

Living conditions were pretty basic by today's standards and gave little privacy; each girl slept in a dormitory which was divided into small cubicles with no doors. Each cubicle accommodated four girls in two bunk beds. There was little personal storage and there were no chairs.

Hot water was available in an ablutions area which also had flushing toilets, and each dormitory had a couple of coke burning stoves. Meals were taken in a Dining Room next to a Recreation Room. These conditions were quite a bit better than those experienced in some farm houses. (Especially the flushing toilets)! 'Dorms.' were supervised by forewomen who had their own rooms. Clothes were washed in the ablutions area, but one 'dorm.' had a sewing machine which they used to repair clothes. On arrival the girls had to hand over their food Ration Books to the Matron so that the allowed quantities of food were available.

What Did They Do?

The simple answer is 'just about everything': from animal husbandry to singling sugar beet and driving tractors, including the very large caterpillar tractors used to clear derelict land. They dug and cleaned out ditches and dykes, built bridges, cut down trees, harvested cereals, cleared rough land to bring it back into productive use. Training was given and competence certificates were awarded, for example, Tractor Proficiency.

A Typical Day.

Breakfast was usually cereal or porridge and the evening meal was at 6.00 pm. Around 7.30am they left for work, either on a bike which they had to rent if they were working alone, or on an army lorry. If they were 'field workers' and working in gangs of 8-10 they were supervised by a 'Ganger' and were sometimes paid piece-work rates.



The London girls ready for work.

The girls tended to work in groups from the same region.

For the mid-day break the girls made sandwiches (4 slices of bread) to go with some cheese and perhaps a piece of cake. They mainly drank cold tea unless they had a Thermos flask which they could buy from Henry Platt's shop in the village. Sometimes eggs could be purchased from local farms. This was a luxury as eggs were rationed and difficult to come by. On their return there was great competition for who got into a bath first!

Time Off

Despite the hard work there was still time for fun. After the evening meal their time was their own. Sometimes they hosted events in the Recreation Room and there were always the 12 pubs in the village to visit with their boy-friends. (The Half Moon pub was handily close).

A visit to the cinema in Mildenhall was possible by bus on Saturday afternoons and there were dances at the Village Hall. Every six weeks the girls got a weekend off with a travel warrant so that they could go home but they had to travel in uniform and they had to be back in the hostel by 10.00pm, OR ELSE! At 10 the door was locked and the Warden was vigilant! There would be 'big trouble' for any late-comers who were confined to the hostel for a week. The one exception to this seems to have been an extension of the deadline to midnight if they were invited to a dance at the Airforce Base, (then an RAF Base.) Again, their return was checked by the Warden.

The village boys and men of the armed forces stationed locally greatly appreciated the arrival of so many girls!



Land Army girls and village lads the by church wall.

In 2019-20 the Lakenheath Heritage Group was associated with the Suffolk Stories 'Soil Sisters' Project (Suffolk Archives). A former Lakenheath Land Army girl was interviewed. You can hear her by clicking on the link below.

[Listen to the memories of a Lakenheath Land Army girl.](#)

Reproduced by kind permission of Suffolk County Council and Suffolk Archives.



Celebrating the End of Service. (Circa 1945)

After the War.

One of Roy Silverlock's interviewees said that the WLA finally left Lakenheath in 1952. Confusingly official websites give the date as 30th November 1950. It's possible that an 'unofficial' Land Army presence remained in the area simply because of continuing labour shortages and need to improve the productivity of the Fen still further. Perhaps some girls wanted to stay! The WLA legacy took another form with a considerable number of girls marrying local men, many remaining in the village.

Lakenheath men who married girls from the Women's Land Army.

Squadie (Zylpha) Bailey married Mabel E Harvey 1945	Reg. at Newmarket.
John W Bailey married Dorothy Redfern from Northwich. Cheshire. 1947	Reg. at Newmarket.
Reginald Bennett married Eileen Hallem. 1950	Reg. at Newmarket.
Ivor Bennett married Josephine King 1949	
Kenneth Brooks married Joyce Leaks 1955.	
Victor Butcher married Margaret M Turpie 1950 in Bolton Lancs;	
Graham L Cook married Joyce Povey 1947 in Wandsworth, London.	
Richard (Dick) Crane married Lily M Orbell 1942 in Huntingdon.	
Kenneth (Peter) Coleman married Elsie M Cox 1948 in Durham.	
John Coleman Married Gwendoline Morris 1945 Wandsworth, London	
Frederick (Loo) Flack married Brenda Rosenoff 1950	Reg. at Newmarket.
Alfred Halls married Winifred Hinsworth 1945	
Geoffrey Halls married Doris E Hinsworth 1951.	
James G Halls married Lilly D Hannant 1942 in Staines, Middlesex	
Jack (Eric) Hensby married Irene Clough 1947 in Bradford, Yorkshire.	
Mark (Margason) King married Grace Bond 1945 in Brentwood, Essex	
Eric Mackender married Edith Taylor 1949	Reg. at Newmarket.
Leonard H Mackender married Edith Roebuck 1946 in Bradford, Yorkshire.	
Ronald Mackender married Eileen Rowlands 1945 in Manchester.	
Leonard E Mackender married Mary Holloway 1947 in Yorkshire.	
Victor Mackender married Reene Parker, b Bradford, 1946	Reg. at Newmarket.
Eddie (Frederick) Howard married Edna Robinson 1947	
Cyril Matthews married Betty Jackson 1949 in Chesterfield	
John (Joseph) Parsons married Audrey Jean Suddards 1950 Bradford, Yorkshire,	
Johnnie Parsons married Lilly M Brooks 1943 Acle Norfolk.	
George Palmer married Winifred E Howell 1944 in East Grinstead, Sussex.	
Ted (Edward) Palmer married Edna Ramskill 1948 in Barnsley Yorkshire.	
Charles Palmer married Marjorie M Higgins 1950	Reg. at Newmarket.
Victor Palmer married Margaret M Turpie 1950 Bolton, Lancashire	
Thomas C (Tobler) Rutterford married Joan I Prater 1949 Wantage Oxfordshire.	
Alva Rolph married Sybil L Binning b Clapham 1950 Lambeth London.	
Victor Roper married Vera Hardie 1948 Ilford Essex.	
Stanley Rutterford married Pamela Thomson 1949	Reg. at Newmarket.
Bob (Robert) Stanford married Mabel Fox 1947 in Pontefract Yorkshire.	
Horace Smith married Matilda Couriel b London, 1942	Reg. at Newmarket.
Alfred (George) Shinkins married Ellen Phillips 1946 Ilford Essex.	
Thomas Sutton married Irene Smith 1948	Reg. at Newmarket.
Thomas (Tucker) Tuffs married Dorothy A Merritt b Farnam 1942	
Thomas Tuffs married Hilda Argyle 1946, Walsall.	
Sammy (Cyril) Tuffs married Shirley (Marjorie) Sherlock 1946, Sheffield.	
Arthur Tuffs married Pamela Clements 1949 in Ixworth Suffolk.	

This list is reproduced thanks to research by Cyril Matthew and Ken Turner.

So effective had the WLA girls been that by 1949 the Fen had become significantly more productive. But not only that: by marrying local men the village was given a new lease of life after the war and several of these girls went on to play significant parts in the life of the village in addition to raising a new generation.

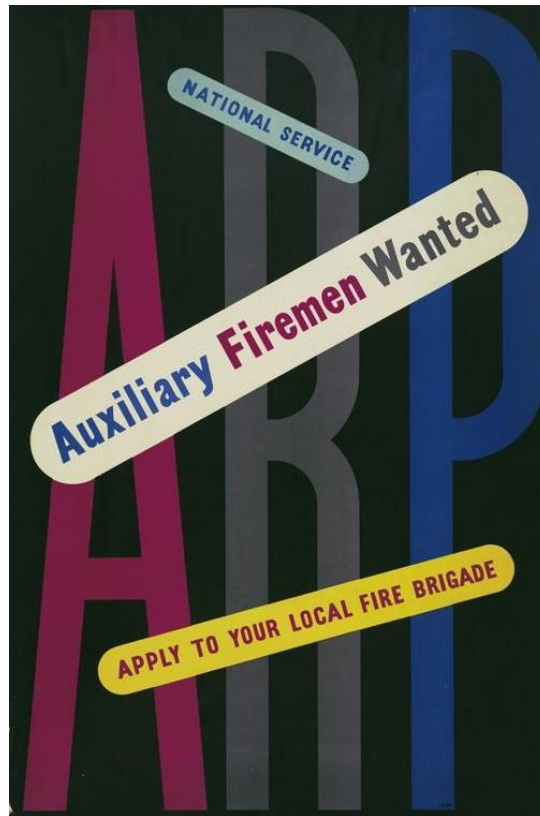
In 1953 the Hostel was converted into accommodation for couples made homeless as a result of the war.

Much of the information contained in this story is available due to the research and recording of the social history of the Village in the last century by Roy Silverlock, who died in 2019. The Heritage Group is the recipient of much of his work.

As far as it's possible to know, the following villagers assisted Roy with his research:

Mrs. Joyce Cook, Mrs. Sybil Rolph, Mrs. Ethel Butcher. There may of course be more. Please let us know if you have any more information.

4. Lakenheath Auxiliary Fire Service. Sub-Station 13.



Auxiliary Firemen Wanted. (1939)

IWM Art. IWM PST 3467. Imperial War Museum.

The volunteer Auxiliary Fire Service came into being in January 1938, becoming the National Fire Service in 1941. In cities and large towns the Fire Service was supported by both 'fire watchers' and the WVS who had particularly important roles during bombing attacks. Many of the fire watchers were women and the WLA provided food and hot drinks in respite areas. Because most young men were in the armed forces many much older men became firemen, sometimes with lads too young to 'join up'. Fire equipment varied very considerably throughout the country: at first Lakenheath's pump, similar to the one below, was towed behind a lorry. It was later replaced by a purpose-built fire engine.



*The Lakenheath crew with the lorry possibly at a carnival.
The number plate shows registration between Jan. 1921 and July 1930.*

The lorry being pulled by a horse compete with it's ladder.

Both photos donated anonymously.



Chatteris Auxiliary Fire Servicemen. Vehicle and towed pump. Circa 1940-45.

Photo reproduced by permission of Cambridgeshire Community Archive Network and Chatteris Museum. Photo: P Murphy.

We know who the Lakenheath firemen were because of an amusing poem by Marie Laflin's uncle, George Gathercole written some time during the war. Marie is Clement Gathercole's daughter.

The Lakenheath Team were:

Leading Fireman - Clement (Clem) Gathercole.

Firemen- Campbell Serjeant, Horace Sale, Margerson (Marg.) Rutterford, Zilpha Bailey, Ted Palmer, Arthur Shinkins, John Shinkins, Bob Grindling, Harry 'Haddy' Bennett, Bill ('Plummer') Morley, Fred Olley. (He lived just past Lakenheath Station), and Reg. Webb, who was a porter at the station.

According to Marie Laflin the majority of fires attended were to bombers which crashed on landing coming back from Germany although there was at least one barn fire in Undley which Ken Turner remembers they tackled.

Marie describes a 'call out'.

"Early evening we would watch the Wellington [and Lancaster] bombers taking off from RAF Lakenheath to bomb Germany. They had a big letter on their tails and were known as A for Able, C for Charlie, N for Nuts, S for Sugar and V for Victor etc. We would wave and wish them safe return but sadly many never came back and several crashed on return.

*My father and his firemen attended those crashes and very rarely did any of the crew survive. Very sad times. One Sunday evening dad was called out of the Methodist chapel as just after take-off a plane had come down on the playing field where the youth hut later stood. It came down between houses on Eriswell Road and crashed. *Mr. FRED BULLEN, who was in the Royal Observer Corps, lived near and rushed to help. All crew members escaped except one who had unfortunately broken his back and was trapped. Fred was awarded a medal for his bravery".*

We think that Marie has miss-remembered here. Lancaster bombers were not based at Lakenheath. They may have been Stirlings.

Marie Laflin Childhood Memories 2016.

*Chief Observer Fred Bullen, Lakenheath ROC was awarded a Commendation by King George VI in for his attempts to rescue the crew. Later in the 1950's he was awarded the British Empire Medal.

Normally Clem Gathercole received the Red Alert by phone at his home.

There were two fire depots in the village during the war, the first being in a purpose-built shed opposite Clem Gathercole's house which was 11 Wings Road on the site now occupied by 22 Wings Road. Clem was a partner in the building firm Gathercole and Serjeant. Later the depot was moved to a purpose-built shed (Martin's Garage) near to where Ike Clift had his barber shop. This was roughly opposite St. Mary's Church on or near the site of the old 1920's cinema. (See Timeline Part 5).



Clem Gathercole's uniform hat.



Clem's wartime fire helmet.



The National Fire Service hat badge.

Photos by kind permission of Marie Laflin

OUR LOCAL NFS

A poem written to be recited by George Gathercole

*"In Lakenheath as you may know
We have a band of men
Who are always on the spot
At any time of day or night be called out to go
To fight a fire and put it out
For that's their job you know.*

*1. We must be quite honest and give these men their due
Who seldom get a word of thanks for all the work they do!
Sometimes it happens in the day, sometimes at dead of night
Then from a cosy bed they're called some deadly fire to fight
Perhaps you'd like to know their names. So I will do my best
To tell you briefly who they were, although you may have guessed.
2. Well first there's Clem the captain, called him Patchy it's the same
Although I'll bet the others call him quite a different name!
But if you want him quickly and fires are raging o'er
Just get a local telephone and dial TWO THREE FOUR.
Then there's his partner Campbell, hasn't altered not a lot
Although he now is married and little children got.
The youngest is a little girl, the oldest a boy
And both to him and his dear wife they bring a lot of joy.
3. Then I can think of Horace who is rather tall and fair
And since he's been a foreman lots of troubles has to *hear.
*(Note: or may be written as 'bear').
He's got the sweetest little wife whose smiles are all galore
When pushing daily papers through the knockers on the door.
I also think about old Marg. He's tall and handsome too
He's got a little bungalow on Undley Road you know
He also has a little son, a lovely little lad.
Bruce is his mother's pride and, he's so much like his dad!
4. Now we come to Zilpha and Ted as you will all agree
Two fine and hearty fellows, who married ought to be!
They do not seem to settle and just prefer to roam
Instead of giving some nice girl a happy little home.
Then there's the Shinkin brothers, there's Arthur and there's John
For these two quiet fellows never grouse just carry on.
I wouldn't say they're better than the others in the team
But I know they are good workers from what I've heard and seen.
5. Then what about old Robert? We like to call him Bob
Who used to be so very keen a cricket ball to lob!
His name is Haddy, we all know he's a handy chap!*

*And still that keenness he can show when called a fire to fight
And always shows his commitment whether in the day or night.
I know one I've not mentioned, none the more for that
He is caretaker at the *hall and much of his time it takes
Although his fireman duties he never will forsake.
6. Another one who shows his eagerness and will
Perhaps you may have already guessed, his name is Bill
For whatever he is doing, to him it's all the same.
Sometimes I've heard folk call him by quite another name.
Now let me see I really think there is another one
Who I must try to mention before my time is done.
7. His name is Fred, you know him well, a decent sort is he,
And such a long way has to come as you will all agree.
Last but not least there's Reg, a decent kind you know
He always seems to be the same wherever he may go.
If we like him, could pleasant be at any time of day
Life would be more bearable as we went on our way.
A better lot you could not find for all the jobs they have to do
They never seem down-hearted, they never look forlorn
And always look so very smart when in their uniform.*

**The Peace Memorial Hall.*

The bravery and commitment of non-combatants such as the auxiliary firemen is sometimes overlooked.

5. Air Raid Precautions Wardens.



'Air Raid Wardens Wanted'

© IWM Art. IWM PST 13880 Imperial War Museum

Robert Kidner has given an account of the role of the ARP in 'Times Remembered' on the website.

Captain Alfred William Kidner was a WW1 veteran who was too old to serve in the new war. He was a well-known local farmer and expert asparagus grower. Because of his military experience he was appointed Head Air Raid Warden for the village. Amongst his duties was the distribution and storage of gas masks, which he kept in his garage in Back Street. We don't know the location of the ARP post. There were a number of wardens, male and female in the village.



'Hitler Will Send No Warning'

©IWM Art. IWM PST 13861 Imperial War Museum

Lakenheath's ARP wardens found in the 1939 National Register were:

Leading Warden. Capt. Kidner.

ARP First Aid wardens.

Miss Elizabeth Sizer, Miss Theresa Rolph, Goward House. Mrs Bertha Howard, Back Street. *Miss Pricilla Cooper, Mill Road. Miss Martha Noble who was Miss Cooper's housekeeper

*Head teacher of the Infants School.

ARP Wardens.

Herbert Dell, George Peachey, Eriswell Road. John (Jack) Large, Bell Hotel High Street. Gerald Miller, High Street. John Talbot, Back Street. Undley's warden was Oscar Harding.



A mother and baby in gas masks. (1941).

©IWM D 3918. Imperial War Museum.

WARNING: Please note that WW2 gas masks contain asbestos, the dangers of which were unknown during the war. DO NOT TRY ONE ON EVEN FOR A SHORT PERIOD OF TIME.

It's important to note that some full time Air Raid Wardens in centres of largish population, and responsible to the local authority, were paid (£3.00 per week). In less populated places like Lakenheath it was an unpaid part time duty. In villages of less than 1500 inhabitants like Lakenheath, things were more flexible. For example, there would probably be only be one ARP post.

Each ARP post was comprehensively equipped:

Per. warden. 1 armlet of standard design.
 1 steel helmet.
 1 civilian duty respirator.

Plus in quantities necessary:

Light oilskin anti-gas suits.	3 electric torches.
Pairs of rubber boots.	3 whistles.
Pairs of anti-gas gloves.	2 hand rattles.
Anti-gas eye shields.	1 hand bell.
Anti-gas curtains.	Small First Aid Box.
A manuscript book to record 'occurrences'.	

*From: Air Raid Precautions. Hand Book no. 8. 2nd Edition. 'THE DUTIES OF AIR RAID WARDENS'.
Issued by the Home Office (Air Raid Precautions Dept. 1938.*



An ARP Warden wearing remote breathing apparatus.

Photo from the Air Raid Precautions Manual No3. "Rescue Service Manual". 1942 HMG Stationary Office 1942.

ARP wardens did not have powers of arrest but they were obliged to carry out patrols and report infringements of black out regulations and to act with both police and fire services. In the event of an air-raid they were responsible for ensuring that elderly or infirm people were as safe as possible. They were responsible not only for the distribution of gas masks but also to ensure that people wore them correctly.

The closeness of Feltwell and Mildenhall and Lakenheath bases meant that all three received the attention of the Luftwaffe, particularly in 1940 and 41.

An Air Raid Warden's responsibilities did not extend to military installations, even so there are at least three occasions found by Roy Silverlock where the bombs fell perilously close to the village as well as several attacks on targets further away.

*9 Oct. 1940. Flatts farm, now Wingfield Road. *3 HE's + UXB and 1 Oil bomb - No damage.*

16 Feb.1941. The Warren and Station Rd. 30 HE's and many incendiaries -1 Council house damaged.

13 Oct 1941. 4 HE's. Wangford Hall Barnardo's Home- 2 Boys slightly injured.

**HE- High explosive. UXB- Unexploded bomb. Oil bomb- a large incendiary bomb.*

The Warren was bombed on several occasions, with one attack successfully damaging the decoy airfield on Eriswell Warren!

The industrial installations at the Chivers Factory, The Bryant and May Bliss Estate, and The Chicory Factory were all bombed resulting in one death at the Chicory Factory.

The Auxiliary Firemen and the WVS might well have been involved in these incidents. In July 1942 the Air Raid Precautions in the village served another purpose in the village at the village pond. Some of the sand, possibly set aside to extinguish fires, was used to create an artificial sea-side. Daphne Austin's painting interpreting this occasion can be seen in Timeline 6.

6. The Women's Voluntary Service.

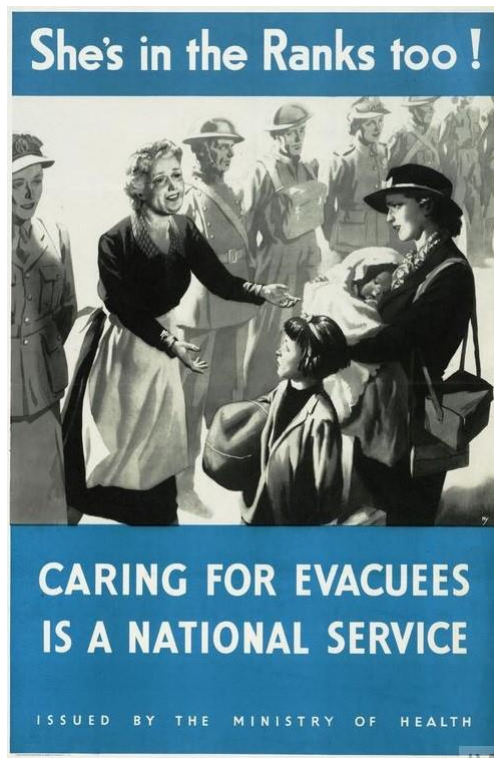


'Women Wanted To Help the Children from Evacuated Areas'.

IWM Art. IWM PST 15106 Imperial War Museum

The WVS was part of the civil defence organisation and carried out a wide variety of tasks, from involvement in the ARP service, running field kitchens, to rest centres for bombed out people. They ran canteens at main railway stations and looked after children who were being evacuated. What they did would have depended very much on what was locally needed, helping with domestic duties in hospitals for instance. Women who could drive were often asked to drive ambulances. Most women who served in the WVS were also housewives who took up duties in what little spare time they had. In Lakenheath it seems that on occasions the WVS provided accommodation for Home Guard members on exercises as well as darning soldiers' socks! By the middle of the war over a million women were involved.

The first evidence of WVS activity in the village came from Ken Turner who remembers evacuees from London arriving in Undley accompanied by some 'lady officials', in all probability from the WVS. It was common for evacuees to find country life confusing, difficult, and in some cases, frightening. The WVS had a significant part to play in reassuring the new, temporary arrivals. They also had to have 'diplomatic' skills which might be necessary in disputes between hosts and the newcomers. One WVS member who played an important part here was Mrs. Gladys Kidner, wife of Capt. Kidner, who was responsible for organising the housing of evacuees from London. Also remembered are Lady Grace Briscoe, Mrs. Marshal, the vicar's wife, and Mrs. Household, who lived towards the top of Cemetery Road. The 1939 Register also identified Mrs Doris Mallet, living at the Post Office as a WVS member. There may well have been more whose names we have not discovered.



'She's in the Ranks too'

© IWM Art. IWM PST 8561 Imperial War Museum

Bites to Eat.

There is no evidence of there having been a *British Restaurant here, but sandwiches and hot drinks were regularly made on a shift basis at a canteen (probably a **mobile canteen) run by the 'Church Army' and WVS on a field opposite the church, and sometimes at the Land Army Hostel, where, for example, the Home Guard units on exercises could get a bite to eat.

*Most towns had a British Restaurant which served food during the day. Really, they were more like a drop-in canteen. The maximum price per set meal was 9d. or 4p. They were non-profit making and were set up by the Ministry of Food but often were run by voluntary organisations.

**A considerable number of organisations and countries provided or paid for mobile canteens.



A Salvation Army mobile canteen.

©IWM B 14143. Imperial War Museum

Before the provision of school dinners, which did not become statutory until 1944, the WVS here supplied sandwiches to children who could not get home and back in time for afternoon school.

Robert Kidner remembers being roped in to help during the school holidays. He was told off for not spreading the margarine right to the edges of the*** bread.

*** Bread in the form of the National Loaf was made from wholemeal flour with added minerals. It was not well liked.
Wikipedia.

I remember an appreciative quote from a serviceman of the time.

'They were everyone's mum or auntie or granny'!

After the war the WVS volunteers continued their service to the community and in 1966 were honoured by the addition of 'Royal' to their title.

7. Volunteer Observer Corps. (VOC). Later the Royal Observer Corps. (ROC).

The Volunteer Observer Corps was founded in October 1925 following a trial which took place in the area around Maidstone and Horsham with the cooperation of Chief Constables. This trial involved Special Constables who operated as observers and this continued up to the commencement of the war. The success of the tests led to the establishment of a chain of observation posts which were controlled by regional group centres. By 1936 there was full coverage from Flamborough Head in Yorkshire to Poole Harbour in Dorset. In 1939 the observer Corps administration was transferred to the Air Ministry and the observers relinquished their special constable status.

Wikipedia and Royal Observer Corps. roc-heritage.co.uk

In 1938 the VOC was mobilised as a result of the Munich Crisis and this highlighted some deficiencies in coverage. Partly as a result of the mobilisation 14 Group was established at Bury St. Edmunds. Along with other groups it was involved in a number of exercises to test the accuracy and communication of sightings to the various Group HQ's which then went to RAF Duxford. The so-called Phoney War gave the opportunity for real time practice with the RAF fighter squadrons. Each post was permanently connected by GPO (General Post Office) land telephone line to the Group centre so that aircraft spotted and plotted could be reported speedily to the various air defence commanders. Aircraft could be observed, identified and tracked, and height and course passed from one post to another, each Post reporting to the Group Centre so giving a confirmation of their course and enabling interception by fighters or air-raid warnings to be given.

David Addy: The St. Edmundsbury Chronicle 2000.
Royal Observer Corps Association. roc-heritage.co.uk

'In 1938 it was decided that there were insufficient posts in Norfolk and Suffolk. The solution was to provide a new Group Headquarters in Bury St. Edmunds, 14 Group. This was completed and opened on 24. 6. 1939 in the Guildhall, Bury St. Edmunds where it has remained to this day. Posts serving this Head Quarters were already in existence, certainly for the exercises in September 1939. It's thought that the first Lakenheath Post was provided by early 1939, having been built in the plantation at the top of Broom Road with its platform above the trees. Later the site was moved to the present site in August 1944 and consisted of a wooden hut and canvas screen for weather protection of the instruments. The old post remained in place until after the war'.

Colin Brown.

The National Registration of September 1939 gives the following three men as members of the Lakenheath VOC. Entries were hand written.

Mr. Charles Stanford. 5/6/1900. 13 Avenue Road. General labourer. Observer Corps. RAF.
Mr. William Crane. 22/6/1898. 8 Council Houses, Eriswell Road. General labourer.
Observer Corps.

Mr. James Brown. 10/9/1898. 6 Council Houses, Eriswell Road. General labourer.
Observer Corps RAF.

Ancestry UK 1939 Register. Research by Ken Turner.

Lakenheath observers early in the war also were:

Mr. Henry Williams, Brandon House, Wings Road. Director of the Chicory Factory. (Head Observer).
Mr. Easy Raven, High St. (Bus Proprietor). Mr. John Brown, High St. Mr. Sergeant Coleman.
*Mr. James Brown. Joseph Rutterford. Samuel Rutterford. Mr. Burt Mackender, Station Road.
Mr. William (Bill) Crane, later a Sargent, Home Guard. Mr. James Cooper. Mr. Horace (Horry)
Fincham. Mr. Walter Smith. Mr. Charles Stamford. Mr. Frank Mortlock. Mr. Thomas Green.

The Corps was granted its 'Royal' status in April 1941 in recognition of its important role in the defence of the country before and during the Battle of Britain by King George VI.

***The Air Defence of Great Britain INSTRUCTIONS for OBSERVER POSTS 1941.**

States of readiness for the Posts.

Stage 1 - "Readiness."

This stage will represent the full manning of all Centres and Posts being actually on the look-out.

Stage 2 - "Available."

In this stage the crew of two men should be at each Post, but one may be resting in the shelter or elsewhere, provided he remains within earshot of the telephone bell. *The Post Instrument should be erected and covered, and one man must be on the look-out.

All communications remain switched through.

The conditions under the AVAILABLE must be such that the Group can be at READINESS within the number of minutes ordered.

**The Air Ministry, Revised April 1941 in Royal Observer Corps. ROCA Heritage. www.roc-heritage.co.uk*

The Post was required to provide to following information:

1. Post number. 2. Number of aircraft. 3. Seen or heard? 4. Grid reference. (This taken from a specially prepared map). 5, Direction of flight. 6. Height. 7. Type of aircraft.

A typical first report would be:

"B2 calling, three aircraft seen 6153 flying North, height 8,000 ft".

Followed up by a more exact report with further information.

"8000 ft estimated (or corrected) height. Friendly bomber or Fighter, Hostile, or Unrecognised, and if recognised :- Wellington or Dornier (for example)".

The maintenance of the telephone land line was given a high status.



A Post Instrument plotter, with a Mickelthwaite height adjuster attachment, used to plot aircraft.

Photo from Wikipedia. ©allowed in the public domain.

The ROC had become essential to the air defences of the country and this was recognised when King George VI visited the post at Bromley, Kent in 1940 when there was an expectation of imminent invasion.



King George VI with an officer and men of the Observer Corps. (1940)

© IWM H5178. Imperial War Museum.

"During his recent two day visit to the Eastern Command the King saw men of the observer corps who, in all weathers maintain a constant watch for hostile aircraft. They are the eyes and ears of the system of detecting enemy machines coming over this country and his Majesty was very interested in the men and their work."

Taken by Mr. Puttnam. 31.10.40 in IWM H 5178.

The Battle of Britain. 1940.

Although the newly developed radar chain defence was able to spot enemy aircraft approaching our shores the only way that hostile aircraft could be tracked over land was by observation by the ROC. This required the identification of types of aircraft, both 'friendly' and 'unfriendly', which were often flying at very considerable heights. The ROC was required to provide 24/7 observation and to be 'on watch' and reporting for the duration of the battle - July to October, and at the height of 'The Blitz'. These duties generally continued until 1945. The ROC was an essential cornerstone of the air defence of this country and it played a major part in the tracking of the V1 flying bombs towards the end of the war.

ROC personnel were classified 'A' and 'B' with the A group being on watch for 56 hours per week, and the B group 24 hours per week. This allowed for members to continue with their everyday employment.

Wikipedia



Lakenheath Post with the post in the tree. Circa 1944.

Left to right.

Front row: Sammy Tuffs, Ralph Ashman, Harry Rutterford, Charlie Bennett, Tom Tuffs, Jim Brown, Horry Fincham, Walter Flack, George Peckett.

Middle row: Sarge Flack, David Howard, *Fred Bullen, Herb Coleman, Johnny Coleman.

Front row: Ebb Flack and Harold Bennett.

*Chief Observer Fred Bullen, Lakenheath ROC was awarded a Commendation by King George VI for his actions at the site of a crashed aircraft in the village. Later, in the 1950's he was awarded the British Empire Medal.

See also 'Plane Crashes and a Village Hero'.

D Day involvement:

The Seaborne Observers: Unsung Heroes.

'In 1944 as part of the D-Day landings three Observers from the Lakenheath Post, Sammy Tuffs, Barry Hensby and George Peckett were amongst the 796 selected from 1376 Observers and 29 Officers. who volunteered for temporary service in the Royal Navy. They became 'Seaborne' Observers on 'D.E.M.S' (Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships) which were used as supply vessels in the D-Day landings and they acted as spotters for the gunners because the Royal Navy had limited experience in aircraft recognition. They were enlisted for one month (with an option to extend to two months) and were paid a special rate of £1 per day and given the rank of Petty Officer. Their ages ranged from 17 to 70. Two of these observers were killed, 22 survived their ships being sunk. One was injured by shell splinters and one by a flying bomb when the ship was in harbour'.

Colin Brown



Lakenheath Post Observers during their Seabourne training.

Barry Hensby, standing 1st left. Sammy Tuffs, standing 6th from the left.

George Peckett sitting 2nd from the right.

The Post stood down from war time duties in May 1945.

The Cold War

In January 1947 the ROC was reformed and a new Post at Maids Cross on the Warren(B1) was established, remaining under 14 Group. In 1953 Post B1 was transferred to 7 Group Bedford, and 14 Group was stood down.

It's at this time that the Orlit Post was built. This can still be seen.

Later, in 1968, Lakenheath (post 46) became part of 6 Group, Norwich, together with Posts at Mundford (47), Thetford (48), and Garboldisham (45). Lakenheath's administration name and call sign was JULIETE 3.



An 'Orlit' Post. A sectional concrete building named after its inventor.

Tensions between the NATO allies and the countries of the Warsaw Pact led to a race to achieve military superiority. Defence against air attacks, both by aircraft and missiles became ever more important. Once again Lakenheath Post played its part.

*The ROC's responsibilities were expanded to include observing and reporting on the effects of a nuclear attack which included the monitoring of radio-active fallout. It was this development of their role which led to the construction around 1962 of the underground Post on Maids Cross whose ventilation and entrance system can still be seen.

**Royal Observer Corps Association: Heritage of the Corps.*



The ROC Post in the 1960's with the posts Identification board.



View of the Post showing ventilation ducts.

*possibly in the late 1970's
know what he was doing!*



*An unknown observer,
early 80's. We don't*

Training and Attainment.

As might be expected training was intense and high levels of aircraft recognition continued to be essential and members were required to attend an annual week's training at an airbase. During WW2 training and testing had focussed solely on aircraft recognition but demands changed in the Cold War to include nuclear warning and monitoring. The competence of observers was again tested annually.

In June 1941 'The Aeroplane Spotter' magazine featured the development of film to be used to train aircraft spotters including the Observer Corps. This extract shows just how demanding the work of the Observer Corps was. (The extract deals with just two aircraft- the Blenheim IV and the German Junkers (JU 88). To an untrained eye there are close similarities between the two aircraft. A mistaken identification could have fatal consequences. In 1941 there were well in excess of 100 different military aircraft flown by the RAF not to mention the enemy aeroplanes!



Stills from a Recognition Film. Analysis Films Ltd. Directed by Mr. W M Larkins in 'The Aeroplane Spotter', June 1941. Published by Temple Press Ltd.

**Each year a Master Test took place in which all ROC members were examined. If a master pass was achieved the successful member was entitled to wear an embroidered blue spitfire badge on their tunic. In order to qualify for this badge a score of 90% had to be achieved. This entitled the observer to wear a blue spitfire badge on the tunic. If five successive 'master passes' were achieved then a red spitfire badge was awarded. This system continued up to a maximum of 30 'Master passes' when a gold embroidered spitfire and a gold star was attained!

**The Royal Observer Corps Association: Heritage of the Corps.

The Lakenheath Post had a considerable reputation for its effectiveness.



‘Lakenheath Observers Win Again.’

The Bury Free Press. June 3. 1955.

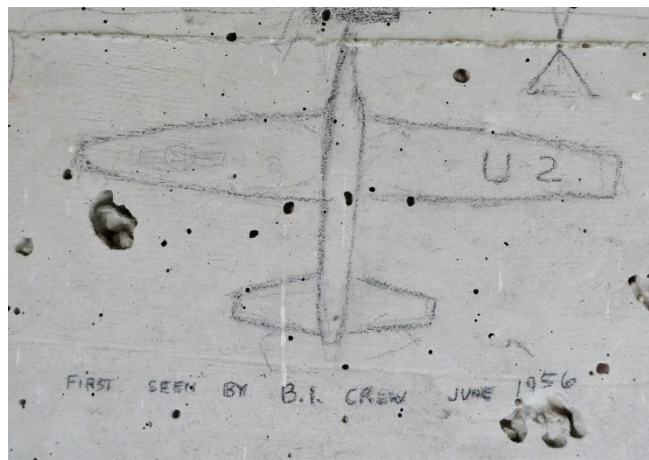
Malcom Rolph writes:

"....., those were heady days, most of us didn't realise at the time, but we were witnessing aviation/ cold war history, under such secret circumstances, under our noses.

Following a winter training period (1955-56) at the British Legion HQ, I had become a member of the ROC at this time and meetings at the post site were started. These were weekly and looked upon as a great spotting opportunity, with all the close airfields and the large number of operational military aircraft: most duty was during the evenings (Exercises were mostly at weekends) and one could expect quite a busy time plotting aircraft activity. This is when the excitement began with the arrival (March/April) of the new aircraft, being shipped in and assembled on site in secret. Eventually, we caught sight of one of the new all silver, jet planes, and we were amazed at the method used for take-off. (This is, of course, all old hat nowadays).

It was thought that we had sighted a couple more aircraft, and after flight testing over a few weeks, (and a couple of political incidents) the aircraft were flown out of the UK, relocating to Wiesbaden in West Germany.

In 1956 an unusual aircraft was spotted at RAF Lakenheath. This was one of the first U2 Spy planes to be seen in this country. Its existence was denied but the Observers on duty made a pencil sketch inside the post as the photograph shows."



The rough sketch of the U2 Spy Plane in the underground Post.

Malcom continues:

"As a sixteen year-old surrounded by older and more experienced members (a few of whom had given war service), I cannot claim to be the first person to witness this event, only that it must have been a combined effort of all the post members serving at that time. With the number of post meetings and sightings, the members tried to describe what they had seen, and from this, a few pencil marks appeared on the wall of the observation area. Fred Bullen, who was our Chief, probably started it with his attempt: not satisfied with his effort, I added my own and it has survived to this day."



*The drawing of the U2 Spy Plane.
Reproduced by permission of Malcolm Rolph.*

Malcom gives the names of the observers in 1955 as:

F.S. Bullen (Chief Observer), L. Rutterford, A. Peachey, M. Flack. E. Rutterford, K. Turner. D. Fincham, and M. Rolph.

In the 1960's the Post members were:

Fred Bullen BEM (Chief Observer). Malcolm Rolph (Leading Observer). Bob Crofts. John Fenn. Don Fincham. Alan Peachey. Ernie Rutterford. Colin Brown. Edwin Curtis. Russell Tuffs. Jim Hannon.



Lakenheath Post on exercise in the 1960's.

Fred Bullen (with binoculars) and Don Fincham with an unknown officer.

1970's:

Malcolm Rolph (Chief Observer). Tony Field (Leading Observer). Ernie Rutterford. Colin Brown. Edwin Curtis. Russell Tuffs. Neville Thompson. Peter Hancock. Colin Gyte. Andy Flack. Alan Halls. Robert Palmer. Michael Wallis. Roland Schultheiss. Nigel Tuffs. Stuart Halls. Don Fincham. Alan Peachey.

1980-1991:

Eric Preston (Chief Observer). Malcolm Rolph (Leading Observer). Tony Field. Edwin Curtis. Ernie Rutterford. Steve Drew. Michael Starling. Brian Lucas. Barry Marchant. Steve Hargreaves. Simon Morley. Michael King. The aircraft reporting system remained in use until the early 1960's and training for potential nuclear fallout monitoring duties continued.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the USSR satellite countries the Cold War came to an end and with it came the disbanding of the ROC. The view at the time was that nuclear monitoring should be the responsibility of the armed forces not the civilian volunteers of the ROC. The Lakenheath ROC Post, together with Posts across the UK, was stood down in 1991 ending the longest period of volunteer service in the village.

The Lakenheath underground Post photographed in 2019.

The following photo's were taken by Ady and Jo Harris when they became owners of the site.



Vertical shaft entrance to the Post.



Cooking facility and worktop.



Single bunk and wall maps. Note the vestiges of an aircraft identification chart on the back wall.



1980-90 bunk bed.



The 'Elsan' chemical toilet.

Photographs reproduced by kind permission of the copyright owners, ©Ady and Jo Harris. 2021.

The Breckland Society have produced a report entitled 'The Cold War in the Brecks', (2021) which gives a detailed account of the role of the ROC and its role in the defence of this country during this period. For anyone wishing to learn more we recommend this report on the link below. The full PDF version is available to download on the page.

<http://www.brecsoc.org.uk/the-cold-war-in-the-brecks/>

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What they said. 1941 and after:

After the Battle of Britain and the Blitz: Air Marshall Sir Hugh Dowding.

"It is important to note that at this time they (the Observer Corps) constituted the whole means of tracking enemy raids once they had crossed the coastline. Their work was quite invaluable. Without it the air-raid warning systems could not have been operated and inland interceptions would rarely have been made".

After D-Day: Air Chief Marshall Sir Trafford Leigh Mallory.

....."All reports agree that the Seabourne volunteers have more than fulfilled their duties and have undoubtedly saved many of our aircraft from being engaged by our ships guns..... convey to all ranks of the Royal Observer Corps, and in particular to the Seabourne observers themselves, how grateful I, and all pilots in the Allied Expeditionary Air Force, are for their assistance, which has contributed in no small measure to the safety of our own aircraft, and also to the efficient protection of our ships at sea. The work of the Royal Observer Corps is often unjustly overlooked and receives little recognition and I therefore wish that the service they rendered on this occasion be as widely advertised as possible."

Quotations taken from Wikipedia.