

Dedham Vale Society

Article 1 : Life in Dedham during wartime

The recollections of farmer and historian Roger Freeman recorded on tape, August 2005. The Freeman family farmed near Lamb Corner to the south-west of the Parish.

PART 1: Wartime

"My memory of the village in the late 30s was that there were an awful lot of smallholdings and small farms, in fact, when farms were registered by the War Agricultural Committee at the beginning of the War, our farm was No 32, which gives you some idea of the number of agricultural businesses within Dedham. Of course, it was possible to make a good living on an acre then if you grew market garden crops. In fact, every farm that you could really call a farm in the village, had cows, and the reason for this is that between the two wars the market for arable crops was very depressed, the prices were so low that you could not make a living, or very few people could unless you had some special outlet. So the only way to really get along in farming was to have dairy cattle because milk was something that had to be supplied fresh; this was before large scale refrigeration. To my memory, there were many small farms which only had four or five cows, subsistence living perhaps, but they did make a living.

My own father had some 30 cows and he had a retail milk round which was another advantage if you were a producer/retailer and there was at least one other in the village and that was the Hall Farm at Dedham which, I believe at that time, belonged to the Clover family.

The Second World War as it affected Dedham

I think that when the war came about there was a lot of fear about air raids and the so-called gentry fled the village, moved west - Sir Alfred Munnings was one of those who did so and there were many others, too, leaving several large vacant houses.

Not long after war was declared, the British army was expanding and they requisitioned many houses, not only in Dedham but elsewhere in the general area, for barrack purposes. The first army unit that I recall were a Guard's outfit, very smart with brand new vehicles and I recall that the vehicles all had a name. I remember that the names of one of the series of vehicles all began with 'W'. There was Walrus, there was Whippety and names like that and I was told that the 'W' came from the Officer commanding that particular platoon or whatever it was.

The Guards eventually moved out and I cannot recall if there was another influx of army folk before the Dunkirk debacle but, certainly, six or seven wooden huts were built alongside the main drive in Hill House Park.



Hill House Park viewed from Lamb Corner today: the parkland was not only used for grazing the Freeman's cattle during World War Two but also by various army units who occupied it between 1940 and 1945

After Dunkirk, Dedham was hit by a recently recruited regiment or part of a regiment from the Gorbals. Some of these guys didn't have uniforms and none of their vehicles were army vehicles, they were commandeered butcher's vans and baker's vans and the people who were driving them were an absolute menace. I recall that, on one occasion, when the civilians were being rationed, they were giving away joints of beef. Apparently, there had been some administrative mess and they had several loads of beef and mutton delivered at Hill House Park, for which they could find no use because there weren't the troops there. I can recall, years after the war, there were still bones from this great feast to be seen on the pasture. Giving it to the villagers was, of course, illegal, but it went on and it was better given to the villagers than wasted. I can also remember that they would march up and down the Birchwood Road singing obscene songs and we boys were delighted because we would march alongside and learn these crude ditties and entertain ourselves for many years.

At that time, the army also occupied the Hewitt Hall, the house behind it belonging to Colonel Collingwood who was away in the army himself, and also an empty house that was at the end of School Lane. They occupied Munnings' house because Munnings had fled. I believe they also occupied Stour House but I can't be sure of that. But they certainly occupied Coles Oak House. So you can see that the army presence was pretty strong around here.

In 1944 we had a few tanks, Cromwells and Shermans, that churned up Hill House Park and skidded up and down the road making a mess of very poor surfaces but they departed after D-Day and then the army presence was gradually reduced until it disappeared altogether in 1945. They organised concerts at the Hewitt Hall and entertained the villagers. I can remember going to a boxing match there. It was almost like living in an army camp.

Generally, I think the army were pretty well behaved but they certainly didn't know what they were doing in 1940. We had cows grazing on the Hill House Park. At that time I lived at Stud House Farm where the dairy was and there was only one little three-acre field adjoining the farm so the cattle had to be driven up the road from the other meadows or, simply, across the road into Hill House Park which was about 50 acres. One night we heard shots and in the morning we found that one of our Red Polls had been shot through the brisket, (that is just above the throat) and the poor animal had to be put down. Apparently, it was a moonlit night and one of the trigger-happy guards - and this was during the threat of invasion - had challenged movement, didn't recognise it was a cow and so he decided to shoot as there was no response. It sounds incredible. I always remember the army officers coming and inspecting the corpse and having an enquiry. My father was somewhat amazed that there were so many people involved in deciding upon whether he should be compensated for this particular act of tomfoolery. It sticks in my mind. We also had problems with soldiers milking the cows because some of the soldiers were recruited from farms and were quite happy milking cows.

The Women's Land Army

We had our first land girls in 1941 and during the war we had 14 in total. Most of the bigger farms had land girls. They came from all walks of life. Some of them were quite posh and some came from the back streets of the big cities. We had one girl who hadn't been on the farm for more than one day when she revealed her original trade by trying to solicit one of our tractor drivers who, with great embarrassment, told my father who with even more embarrassment told the maiden lady, the Canon's daughter who lived in Stratford Road and was supervisor for the land army girls, that he had a young lady whose previous profession appeared to have been prostitution and could she remove her. I always remember my poor father being awfully embarrassed wondering how he was going to put it to this woman; it caused my mother a great deal of amusement.

We also had several unsuitable land girls. We had one who obviously thought the countryside was a place where you could strip off and sun-bathe instead of doing manual work and we had to ask her to put her clothes on after she got down to her bra and pants which was, of course, outrageous in those days and she was despatched. We also had others that couldn't stand the pace. But we had one girl who stayed with us until she retired in 1981 and she became our herdsman. Sylvia Creavey retired to live in the houses down in Dedham eventually, and she was like one of the family. As a young girl of 21 she had been taken out of a rubber factory in the East End, had no farming connections but became one of the two land girls during the war, that we had in the cow shed all of the time. They were a nice crowd, by and large, but a lot of them were quite unsuited to rural life.

We had one girl who married an American and she was pregnant when she married him but they have lived happily ever after and the baby was named after me, believe it or not. Poor little devil! But I met them in later years, a very happy couple, a nice couple. He was a ground mechanic at Boxted. There were one or two others who married Americans. Americans were Hollywood come to life. It is difficult to appreciate that the British cinema in those days was ruled by Hollywood; the cinema was the number one form of entertainment - going to the flicks - going to the pictures. Young girls were brought up to believe in the Hollywood dream of the fast-talking American and suddenly, these guys with their nice, neat uniforms and their outgoing ways, appeared in the village; no wonder these girls fell for them!

Air Raids

During the war, Dedham suffered several air raids. The first bombing that I believe occurred was a stick of bombs that were dropped on land at Stour House. The German pilot was obviously trying for the railway and these were quite small bombs. The craters were not very deep and I can remember being with other boys, rummaging around trying to find souvenir splinters. No one was hurt. The red brick cottage there, I think, lost its windows and had a few tiles off.

In 1941, one evening, a stick of bombs was dropped across Grove Hill on our lands and four exploded opposite the Grove and blasted in the windows and also at Meadowbrook. Nobody was hurt. You can still see the outline of one of the craters in one of the meadows there today. The rest of the stick of bombs went over the Grove and landed in the fields just behind my house. Again, these were quite small bombs (100kg or something like that, I should think) again, no one hurt.

Later that year two land mines were dropped. One of them hung in a tree at Coles Oak Lane, just before you get to the house where Captain Watson lived just above Coles Oak House and right beside the road and exploded. It pretty well demolished the house beyond Coles Oak House which had no trees to protect it from the full blast, whereas Coles Oak House had. It belonged to a Captain Nunn who was in the war at the time. No one was hurt but these were sea mines on parachutes, although we called them land mines, and they had quite an effective blast. The second mine that was dropped from this aircraft actually landed on a hay stack at Rookery Farm and didn't explode and was defused: I knew nothing about this. One has to remember that in those days private cars were not on the road, so it was either walk, bus or cycle and, quite often, you didn't know what was going on a mile or so away.

In 1944, I think it was February, the Luftwaffe was trying to bombard the airfield at Langham. It was a bright moonlit night and their technique at that time, simply because they feared British night-fighters, was to cross the North Sea at low altitude and then climb up to bombing altitude. At least three aircraft, three Dorniers, were involved, and they were down at tree top height and obviously picked out Long Road in the moonlight and thought it was one of the runways, dropping two sticks of bombs. Sadly, one bomb hit a bungalow where a Mrs Coomber was with her child (her husband was out) and they were both killed. My father, who went to the scene, remembers seeing that the infant had been blown up in the rafters, a scene that haunted him for years. I often heard him talk about going there and seeing this poor baby dead up in the rafters where it had been blown by the explosion of the bomb. These were the only two civilian casualties in Dedham.

On the same night another stick of bombs was dropped in Hill House Park where a lot of soldiers had just returned from the Eighth Army in Italy and I can remember one soldier saying to me "Boy, I think I will go back to Italy. One night home and we're bombed". No harm was done. One of these bombs was dropped so low that the fins broke off in one piece. It was embossed with German Eagles and I thought that this was a wonderful souvenir but I was too frightened to go and pick it up myself so I sent my younger brother to get it, which he did dutifully. It was a wonderful souvenir. A friend of mine in London still has it and I often feel I should have kept that and given it to the village but when I was getting married I thought that it was high time to get rid of souvenirs.

In September 1944 two V1s stormed up the Stour Valley losing height all the time. One of them exploded in a wood at Langham, not far from the searchlight that had been there all through the war, no harm was done. The other one exploded in one of our fields against the A12/Ipswich Road and, in fact the actual site of the explosion is now under the A12 not far from Black Brook Farm. V1s had a surface explosion, didn't make a crater and had a fairly good blast effect. It completely ruined Black Brook Farm but there was nobody living there at the time. I retrieved the wing tip of that Doodlebug and again, I gave that to my friend in London.

Les Parker, who lived in a small thatched cottage in Coles Oak Lane, heard the V1 - we'd hear V1s coming up from the Pas de Calais area, sometimes they would overshoot London and keep coming - and he heard this thing early in the morning when it was still fairly dark. He got out of bed, looked to the south and the poor man nearly had a heart attack when this flaming monster actually flew below the level of his house. It was going up the valley, up the Black Brook and, of course, it hit the Ipswich Road, but he was never to forget this. He was frightened out of his life. He said this flaming monster sounded like a motorcycle with a bad plug - a dreadful sound.

Boxted Straight Road, was also heavily bombed, again, when the Luftwaffe were trying to find Boxted Airfield. There were some dropped on the airfield itself; unfortunately, some G's rushed out of a hut and jumped into a ditch for safety's sake and a bomb landed in the ditch and killed seven of them. That was in August 1943. Apart from that a few anti-personnel bombs were dropped on the airfield by the Luftwaffe but otherwise it was pretty well unscathed.

There were bombs also in East Bergholt, Ardleigh and Lawford; there is hardly a village that did not have them but no-one else was killed. In fact, most of them were dropped when the Luftwaffe had either lost its way or were scuttling home. They might have attempted to attack BX Plastics but if they did set out to bomb, they missed by miles.

One of the biggest drops by a formation was during the Battle of Britain on a cloudy day and these bombs were unloaded by a fleeing Luftwaffe formation or one that had lost its way and they fell across Langham Moor, quite small bombs, but there must have been about 20 to 30 craters and, ironically, many of them were on what became the area of the start of the main runway at Boxted. They were a little bit before their time!

Apart from that we had other incidents like Barrage Balloons that got away in storms. I remember one going down in Hill House Park and the army having great fun trying to capture this brute. Odd things would drop out of aeroplanes at times and, of course, there were crashes.

The only fatality in a crash was a Blenheim Bomber that had taken off from Wattisham on a raid one evening in 1941. Unfortunately, on take-off in the dark, they clipped the top of a tree which damaged the aircraft. They didn't appreciate how damaged it was until they had flown a few miles. Then the pilot ordered the two other crew members to bail out. He was going to bail out himself but an engine fell out of the aircraft as it passed over Bloomfield's Farm, just off East Lane, up on the hill there. I remember seeing this lone engine, and the rest of the aircraft crashed right beside East Lane in a little copse. The pilot, a Sergeant Pilot, was killed in the crash. I have often thought that his name ought to be added to our War Memorial, as he was the only actual military war casualty in Dedham during World War II. That location, you would hardly recognise now, I think the copse has gone but it was right beside the bend in the road as you go down the hill.

The other crash that I recall, actually in Dedham parish, was a Thunderbolt fighter which lost power in its engine on a training flight from Boxted airfield and with this aircraft the pilot managed to, as they say, 'belly it in' (wheels up). He put it down in what was known as the Lamb Field (a 45 acre field behind Lamb Corner that at that time belonged to the Edwards family). Unfortunately, he went between two small oak trees that took off the wings but he survived with only a cut head. I can remember that aircraft and even the date, 9th February 1945. He went on to fly again. He had been a bomber pilot who had finished his tour and had gone on to fly fighters.

Early in the war, in 1940, an RAF Defiant aircraft flown by a Pole - whether he was lost or not I don't know - landed in one of Mr Paris' fields opposite the top gate to Hill House Park. This was of great interest. People came out of Colchester to gawp at this particular aircraft, which was there for a couple of days until it was flown out again. I think they had to refuel it or something. And, whilst it was there a Miles Master aircraft landed and then took off again. Great excitement, because aeroplanes in 1940 were still something of a curiosity. Three years later they were commonplace. Also, a Tiger Moth landed in one of Mr Paris' fields. He had very large open fields.



A view from Dedham Church tower looking east to the estuary from where the Doolebugs came

A Stirling bomber, coming back from a raid, crashed not far from Judas Gap, down there in the marshes - I think that it was between the road, the A143, and Judas Gap. I never went to see it but it burnt out and I think some of the crew were killed. A Liberator bomber crashed in East Bergholt after the crew had bailed out. Crashes were commonplace; in fact, on average, there was one falling out of the sky over England every day during World War II and on many days, more than one. It was dangerous to fly. These aircraft were put together by unskilled labour and often people got into trouble with them. In Langham there were several crashes and forced landings. An Aerocobra behind Langham School in 1941, I recall. A Swordfish naval plane made a forced landing there and in most villages there seemed to be an aircraft crash or a forced landing. Commonplace, just like bombs, sad to say.

Further up the Vale, I can't give you so many details on what occurred because my range, initially, was probably no further than Boxted although I did, as a youngster with a mad interest in aeroplanes in late '44 and early '45, when I was sixteen and eventually seventeen, go out at weekends and cycle for miles on my day off. One day I did 100 miles and boy, was my rear end sore after that. This was simply to go to other airfields and peer over the fence to see what was going on. I cycled up to Norfolk, believe it or not, on one occasion and right up to Cambridge on another - I must have been mad. Other boys of that age were chasing girls and I was chasing aeroplanes. But that is by the way."

This is the first instalment of Roger Freeman's recollections of Dedham life. He is the author of a number of authoritative books concerning, particularly, the part undertaken by the United States Airforce during the war.