

## THE WAR YEARS

In 1914 the start of the First World War meant a change in the lifestyle for all the villages in Britain and Napton was no exception. The conscription, and subsequent loss, of fathers, sons, husbands and brothers affected the lives of many Naptonians. Mrs Nora Balsom remembers Napton and life there during the war years...

"The war really affected the village. We had thirty boys killed, that's a lot from a village. You came to hate seeing the postman. I had no brothers, but my sister lost her boyfriend who she was engaged to. The day he was killed was almost the day before the war finished."

Mr Bill Young, the oldest Naptonian living in the village, fought in France with the Royal Warwick 61st during World War One and was wounded seven days before Armistice was signed...

"You used to get little field cards. You see you got, I'm quite well, I'm alright or I've been murdered and all that and you just signed it and sent it but you couldn't put any information on them. I'll tell you how I did let them know when we were coming from France. There was a man at Rugby, name of Dan Marrit, belonged to a band. Now I knew we were going to Italy but I daren't put it in the letter. I said, 'We're on the move, but where we're going I don't know, but I do hope to meet up with old Dan Marrit some day.' He was an Italian and we were going to Italy. That's how I twisted them and they got the message alright."

But war is also about the people left at home and life had to go on as well as they could manage. Mrs Balsom worked on the family farm with her father...

"At hay time father would employ other people but during the war you couldn't get anybody, only old men. Dad used to give them a drink, their food and five shillings a week. Even if you'd a son they were all taken to the war. There was nobody who got away with anything, not even farmer's sons. Even the horses they took."

She also remembers the lighter, happier times...

"During the war we used to hold concerts.

We used to have a platform on a truck. We didn't have any money and we didn't ask for money, we used to ask for eggs. They couldn't come in without an egg and we used to take the eggs up to Shuckburgh Hall. It was a convalescent home then for all the officers. We used to play to them, they must have been bored to tears. Anyway we went to Southam as well and we had a good time in Southam because with the officers we didn't like acting to them. We used to have a dance for the soldiers every week, cost a shilling."

Four years later, in 1918, came the day they had been waiting for, Armistice Day...

"We were up on the hill by the mill when Armistice was declared and there were people going along the bottom tooting their horns and flags flying out of the tops of cars and my Dad said to me, 'What's happened?' I said I didn't know. We went home and stopped at The Plough on the way. Dad went in and then came out again with a lemonade for me, which was unusual. 'Here', he said, 'the war's over.' We went mad that night. It was lovely, we danced in the street and that sort of thing, it was great."

Twenty one years later, in 1939, the effects of war were once again to affect Napton, perhaps in a more significant way. According to many villagers 'the war changed everything!...

Mrs Gill remembers...

"It was the war that got the women out to work in the towns. Until then I don't think any women went to work in the big towns. There was a little factory down by the brickworks making aircraft, Thornicrofts had it.

Before the war not many strangers came to live in the village. With the war many more people came to live in the area, soldiers (some of them to marry local girls) and, of course, evacuees. Some of the evacuated children came from Coventry and London. Rural life was something alien to them. Some of them had never seen sheep before."

Mrs Baynton had two little girls and a schoolteacher when the evacuees came. The village school wasn't big enough to take all of the evacuees as well as the village children, so the Victory Club was used as a school room. Four teachers came with the children so there was no problem over pupil / teacher ratio.

One of the biggest problems for the people at home was the shortage of basic foodstuffs and household commodities, so rationing was introduced...

"In the country it didn't bother us so much as the people in the town. I should imagine that the rations were very meagre, about two ounces of butter and the same of margarine, two slices of corned beef, a couple of eggs and only about a pound of sugar for a month. I remember someone sending a little boy to fetch the sugar ration, that was for a family so it must have been a two pound bag. He carried the bag, put it down, sat on it and all the sugar came out. The boy had to scoop it all up, whether there was dirt in it or not you'd got to have it. I think the farmers would do much better than anyone else 'cos they had their animals."

Another feature of the village during the war years was the blackout. Mrs Gwyther has memories of it...

"During the war it was really bad because you didn't want to go out at night because you couldn't see anything, no lights. I remember going from my Grandmother's to my Mother's, which wasn't far, and I just didn't know where I was at all. There was no lights, no street lights, no lights in windows and I remember standing for about quarter of an hour absolutely lost. Then somebody opened a door, a little chink of light came and I knew where I was and which way to go. We never had a torch, you couldn't get the batteries. If you had a lamp on your bike you had to have it blacked out. Couldn't see the cars, couldn't see where you were going, it was dreadful. I think really in the villages they kept worse blackouts than the towns."

Mrs Taylor also remembers the shortages...

"With the rations we had a job. Soap was a problem, you had to wash by hand, I finished washing once with shaving soap. You got coupons for clothes and we'd hand things on, swap coupons and the like."

Despite these hardships the villagers did their bit for the war effort and various fund raising exercises were carried out...

"During the second war the railings round houses were collected and the kids at school were sent to collect hips. Every school had it's target to collect the hips to be made into rose hip syrup. Milk bottle tops were collected too."

The following extracts are taken from the school log book for the years 1942, 1943 and 1944...

- Nov 20th 1942 "Since the commencement of the war, 6 tons of waste paper,  $5\frac{1}{2}$  tons scrap iron, 1cwt of brass, 3cwts bones and a quantity of old clothes have been despatched through the District Council lorry."
- Jun 12th 1942 "During the past week, under the County Salvage Scheme, 3 tons of iron, 2580lbs of paper, 420lbs bones and 375lbs rags, besides a number of old tyres, have been collected by the children."
- Aug 25th 1942 "One cwt of rose hips have been gathered by the children."
- Oct 22nd 1943 "Altogether 736lbs of rose hips have been sent from the school."
- May 12th 1944 "For Southam and District 'Salute the Soldier' week a selling centre was held at the school and £3689 was invested in the school account. The target for the school was £500."

Some men remained in the village because of being in a reserved occupation. Mr Taylor, working on the canals, was one of these...

"I was in a reserved occupation during World War Two so I wasn't called up being on the canal but I was in the Observer Corps. We started out as the L.D.V., Local Defence Volunteers. We would march, we laugh about it now when it's all over, but we didn't laugh much at the time when we were up all night. You got a gun but no ammunition."

Being so close to the industrial areas of Coventry the German raids and the bombing of Coventry is vividly remembered. Sam and Gladys Gill have a special reason for remembering the exact date...

"We got married and went to Coventry for our honeymoon. Can you imagine it? Coventry with the war on. My sister came here and we went to her house. We went to see 'Black Velvet' at The Hippodrome, then back to the house and in the night the bombs were dropped on The Rex cinema, The first couple of bombs on Coventry."

Others in the village remember seeing and hearing the planes going over Napton to the destruction of Coventry. Mr and Mrs Taylor remember...

"The bombing of Coventry, which night was it?, November. Oh, it was terrible. We could hear the planes going over. Some people went up onto the hill by the windmill and they could see them bombing. I think we went into the cellar down at the locks. There was a searchlight near us and they tried to bomb that one night and they very near bombed us, that was about half a mile off. Got these searchlights up here and another one about five or six miles away. Then there were the Army Observers dropping bombs for practise all over the place."

On November 11th, 1945 the long awaited day arrived and the end of the war was announced. The village then celebrated with a bonfire, a dance and numerous private celebrations.