

Memoirs Of A West Cowick Boy

I was nine years old when the war was declared and I remember the real fear that the invasion of our country was imminent and inevitable. The enemy had advanced across Europe and our troops who were sent to France had to retreat at Dunkirk and many lives were lost.

Everyone started to prepare for the invasion. Roadblocks were built on the Goole Road at Cowick; a pillbox was erected opposite Cowick Hall Lodge with horizontal slots for the gunners to guard the road. A road block was built near Victoria House at the entrance to Snaith. There were brick walls at each side of the road to cut off the verges. Holes were sunk in the road at this point with hinged steel plates, the idea being that in the event of enemy trucks or tanks approaching, steel girders would be dropped in the holes. In addition, there were forty gallon drums filled with concrete to be rolled into the road.

Soon, we were all issued with gas masks. The masks were given to everyone and were to be carried at all times. They were issued in a square cardboard box with a string to fit round the chest. A walk to school on a rainy day soon put an end to the cardboard box.

Family life for everyone was disrupted after the outbreak of war. Our family was no exception. Brother Jim was already a regular soldier. He left two years earlier to serve his five year stint on India's northwest frontier. It turned out to be much longer than that when he was sent to war in Burma. Brother Jack was called up later and fought with the Commandoes in Italy. Our two sisters, Bia and Marie, joined the W.L.A. and were stationed in Bedfordshire. They were all replaced with evacuee kids from Hull, so our house was still full. Most people over 17 years of age had to register for National Service. Only the workers who were covered by the essential works order, e.g., miners, farmers, escaped call-up but these men were required to do Home Guard or Air Raid Warden Duties. Our Dad fought in the 1914-18 war and was over the age limit for the second war. He worked at the Ordnance Depot at Barlow supplying equipment and ammunition for the Army. A lot of people worked there from Cowick and long hard days were worked loading ammunition for the anti-aircraft guns on the East Coast.

A lot of changes were to take place at Cowick school. One day, bus loads of children arrived from Hull to share our school. They brought their teacher with them who was soon organising accommodation for them. Any household with a spare room was obliged to take as many evacuees as they could. They had been sent to escape from the bombing in Hull. At night we could hear the bombs exploding and the anti-aircraft fire. The upheaval at school went on for the remainder of the war years. Cowick school was packed with children. There were only three rooms but the biggest one had two classes with two teachers teaching at the same time with nothing to divide them. When weather permitted, we seemed to spend more time out of school for lessons than in it. People were being urged to grow their own food and posters were displayed everywhere showing "Dig For Victory". Our school responded by growing vegetables in a part of the field by the churchyard wall. I suppose that whilst we were working out there, it relieved the congestion inside.

Life at Cowick in the war years could have some excitement and adventure for lads of our age. One incident I remember well could have been disastrous for a lot of us. One or two of our local lads and some evacuees had been exploring around the army camp at Cowick Hall and 'found' a lot of 303 rifle bullets and landmine detonators. The dets were the size of a woodbine with two wires attached. After a bit of school yard bartering, swapping army cap badges, buttons etc. it wasn't long before most of the lads had a few of the bullets and dets in their pockets. We discovered that if the bullet was eased away from the cartridge with a pair of pliers, the cordite strips from the cartridge case could be used to make our own fireworks display. Better still, we found that the landmine detonators made a terrific bang if you extended the wires and connected them to a bike lamp battery at a safe distance. This we were doing when we had the inevitable mishap. Four of us were down the Gravel lane at East Cowick behind the vicarage setting off our dets on a gate post when the explosives expert in charge of the map battery got his wires crossed and the det blew up before I had chance to get it in the right position. The mood in our little gang suddenly changed. Two of the lads in our group were with those who got the stuff from the army camp in the first place. With blood dripping from my hand wound, we went to Vallance's shop in East Cowick, washed my hands under the outside tap and did a first aid job with bandages obtained from the shop. We walked home to West Cowick, gloomily discussing the ominous consequences if anyone found out what we had been doing. By the time I got home, blood was seeping through the bandages and my mother had a fit, demanding to know what had happened. I said I had fallen from my bike – the story our gang had agreed on, but there was no fooling my mother and I should have known better than to think otherwise. After bathing my hand in a bowl she said, "These look like shot wounds to me." I went to school the next morning giving the bike story in answer to Mr. Robinson's query. Halfway through the morning lessons, there was a knock on the classroom door and in walked the enormous figure of our local Bobby, Pc. Johnson. My heart sank. After a word or two with Mr. Robinson there was a demand that the lad who had been injured, stand up. I had to stand up and the game was up. After weeks of Police investigation, we were all summoned to appear at Snaith Juvenile Court. The lads who had 'acquired' the detonators were each fined 9/- or 40 pence today. I was called up as a witness and was paid 2/6 or 12 pence witness fee. I suppose my presence in Court was to demonstrate the seriousness of the case to the Magistrates. The C.O. of the regiment stationed at Cowick at the time of the offence, had since been posted down south but was brought back to give evidence. He said these detonators were very sensitive and could have exploded from the heat of your hand. When you know that most of the lads at Cowick school had trouser pockets full, it makes you think! Maybe the C.O. should have been fined 8 bob for losing them.

We village lads kept a respectful eye on two men who lived in West Cowick during the war. One was the local Bobby; Pc Johnson who lived in a police cottage opposite the Ship Inn, the other was Mr. Marshall. He was a wartime Special Constable and lived in a large house off Mill Lane. His house and trees surrounding it were cleared to build what is now known as "The Hollies."

Mr. Marshall was a severe man who eyed all kids with suspicion. After dark, he would don his uniform and emerge carrying a long stick and patrol round Cowick looking for anyone showing light from their windows during the blackout. I remember some were fined at Snaith Court for this offence, yet, when the aircraft searchlight lit up, searching the sky at night for enemy planes, it lit the whole village up like daylight. The searchlight and its crew were stationed at the bottom end of Little London Lane.

Southfield Reservoirs at East Cowick were used by the Royal Engineers to practice building Pontoon bridges etc. When no-one was about, we used to have sail around in the canvas boats they had there – until rumour spread around that German spies had been sailing in a rubber dinghy and carrying guns – a rumour probably invented to deter us lads. And it worked!

War was declared on 3rd. September 1939 and on that day, Carlton Towers was used as a transit camp and men began to arrive there from all over the country. These were Territorial Army and paid reserves from the regular army who were the first to be called up. All householders in Carlton were asked to accommodate soldiers, for sleeping only. This was an unusual step for the army to take, probably because there was a shortage of tents and equipment at that time. Later the military left Carlton to fight in France but were pushed back by the German army and evacuated at Dunkirk. Carlton Towers became a Military Hospital and patients could be seen strolling around Carlton in their distinctive bright blue uniforms.

As the war progressed, RAF Bomber bases were built in our area. Pollington, Burn, Riccall, Brayton, Sherbourn and Church Fenton. When Pollington was completed, I remember the day then first Squadron of planes arrived. We were having an outdoor sports lesson in Mr. Wood's grass field (there was no sports field at Cowick at that time). The planes were Wellington Bombers and they all came together and circled low above us. We were on our bikes to Pollington that evening to see the planes standing at the dispersal points. Some of the planes were close to the road and we could get a good look at them. Many trips were made to Pollington to see the Bombers and I would look in wonder and admiration at the men who flew in them. Wellingtons had twin engines. They had an aluminium frame covered with a fabric skin. After bombing raids, a lot of planes came back in tatters where shrapnel had torn through the canvas. RAF ground crew could be seen sticking patches over the holes and painting them with slope. No wonder sheepskins were worn by aircrew!

Later, four engine Halifax Bombers came to Pollington. These could carry a much greater bomb load. When setting off on a bombing raid, depending on the wind direction, they would fly very low over Cowick with a deafening roar, all engines on full power, gaining height to join other Squadrons over in the eastern sky. By this time, the 1000 bomber raids had started on Germany and almost every evening the sky was full of planes. These aircrews were heroes. They were brave men who could only live for the moment. Plane crashes were a frequent occurrence. Some would complete their bombing mission only to crash when they returned. All sorts of accidents happened. Some tried to land when the plane's undercarriage had been shot away. Long RAF plane recovery vehicles, nicknames "Queen Mary's", could often be seen on our local roads bringing in what was left of crashed planes.

We didn't know at the time that the massive movement of troops and armaments passing by on our local roads was the build up for the invasion of Europe on D Day. Troops were everywhere. At night, they left the main roads and parked up where they could. I remember on a few occasions, Grange Road at West Cowick was full from end to end with troops sleeping in and under the trunks. Local army camps were deserted after D Day. The one at Pollington which housed the Life Guards and Royal Horse Guards regiments (my brother in law, Jim, was one of them), left for the invasion.

German Prisoners of War then occupied Cowick Hall camp. These were guarded by British soldiers who took them out to work on local farms. They were marched to church on Sunday mornings. They sang as they marched and were very smart and well disciplined – not like the Italian POWs who followed them to Cowick. They, too, worked on the farms and also at Barlow Ordnance Depot. The Italians had surrendered in droves in the North African Campaign and were brought here until the war ended. They seemed to have much more freedom than the German POWs. A lot of them had bikes and they were free to ride around the villages in the evenings and at weekends. They wore British army uniforms with round patches sewn on their backs and trousers to distinguish them.

These memories were given to me by Robert Deighton who still lives at Mill House in West Cowick, where he lived during the war.

Notes.

Pollington Airfield was officially called Snaith so as not to be confused with Pocklington Airfield.

Carlton Towers is the Stateley Home of the Duke of Norfolk.