A WHATLINGTON FAMILY IN 1945

The last year of the war - as it proved to be- began badly for the people of Whatlington. Bitter weather in January froze pipes, for those who had them. For those who had no running water, the daily chore of fetching water from wells, tanks, or the spring by the Village Hall, became painful drudgery. Shortage of fuel kept houses very cold; on 26th January, my grandfather Alan Moore recorded that the temperature in his dressing room was 32 degrees Fahrenheit - freezing point. Everyone was exhausted after five and a half long years. In winter, food rations could not be supplemented by foraging or much garden produce. Petrol was scarce; drivers would always stop to offer pedestrians a lift. Many houses had been damaged by bombs; though there were few direct hits, vibrations broke windows and brought down ceilings. Manpower to fix such problems was in short supply.

But there were a few glimmers of change. If you could get to Hastings (by bus), you could walk on the beach again, after years of barbed wire barricades. The black-out had been modified to "dim-out". And the doodlebugs which had plagued the village every night and day the previous summer- 22 shot down in the Battle district on August 29th alone- were now just a bad memory. Hitler's campaign was severely weakened. As my grandfather noted in his diary late in 1944, "We feel that the country is no longer in danger of invasion. Defences & obstacles are being removed".

Living at Hancox were Alan, his wife Mary, and three of their children, Hilary aged 17, my father Richard aged 14, and Meriel, aged 8. The oldest child, Norman, 21, was a 2nd Lieutenant with the Mountain Gunners. On 2nd January they received a telegram saying that Norman was reported missing. Nothing more was heard for three weeks, then the news came that he had been taken prisoner. At least he was alive.

Alan was Medical Officer of Health for the Battle district. Every day he drove to the council offices at Watch Oak in his battered Austin - he had a special petrol allowance. His notebooks record diptheria, scabies, scarlet fever, tuberculosis, even (unfounded) smallpox scares, but the health news wasn't all bad. When he inspected schoolchildren, he noted that many were better nourished than they had been before the war; the rations, though meagre, were nutritionally quite good, and bread and vegetables were unrationed. By 1945 he no longer had to do fire-watching duty on the Watch Oak roof. He had been the oldest member of the Whatlington Home Guard, but this had ceased to be active the previous October- another sign that the end of the war was expected.

In some ways, Whatlington and its surroundings were not so very different to today. The Royal Oak, Church, and Village Hall would be immediately recognisable, and the population of the village was not much smaller than it is now. The bus stopped, then as now, by the Oak. Alan got his car serviced at Vicary's of Battle. When his work took him to Rye, he lunched at Simon the Pieman. The children went to a pantomime at the White Rock

Pavilion, though of the eight cinemas in Hastings only one remains.(They also went to see *The Prisoner of Zenda* at the Battle cinema, now Burstow & Hewett's). But some features of Whatlington life have gone- the shop, run by Mr Croft, selling everything from biscuits to bootlaces, is now Scrays Farm, and the post office, an ivy-covered cottage south of the garage, has disappeared completely, as has the blacksmith's forge by Woodman's.

With spring came good news. On March 8th, "the nine o'clock wireless news this evening announced that the Americans had crossed the Rhine". On 22nd, "An envelope arrived from Norman. It contained nothing but his name. It was from a prison camp & there was much in Polish on the envelope". A couple of proper letters soon followed. The family learned that Norman had shrapnel wounds in his knee (these were to plague him for the rest of his long life) and that he had made friends with his fellow prisoners. He could give few details, so his parents did not learn of the appalling conditions in the camp until much later. Perhaps this was just as well. The family helped decorate the church with primroses for Easter with hope in their hearts.

In April, the weather was marvellous, just as it was this year (2020), brightening the COVID-19 lockdown. The family picnicked in the bluebell woods. Pony enthusiasts Hilary and Meriel went to a gymkhana at Crowhurst Park, and heard the first cuckoo. On the 14th the whole family including Margaret Baker their housemaid (who later married Bill Lavender of what is now Watermill Cottage) went to Hastings for a day out. Margaret took Meriel onto the beach, Mary did some shopping, and the others went to see *Western Approaches*, a "wonderful film, about an Atlantic convoy". The programme was interrupted by the manager, who announced that President Roosevelt had died. There were gasps of dismay from the large audience.

The war wasn't quite over. On 15th April, an explosion shook the house, "the heaviest yet recorded in this part of the world". But on 23rd the "dim-out" ended, and with it the evening ritual of drawing every curtain and closing every shutter. "Hoorah!" wrote Alan.

On 26th, Mary and Alan's wedding anniversary, they learned that Norman had been flown back to England, the prison camp having been liberated by American tanks. From the plane, Norman had recognised the Footland Wood and the shape of the Hancox fields. "Gee bud, do you want a parachute?" said the American Red Cross sergeant who was with him. After a few days in a hospital in Leeds, Norman came home, on May 2nd, the day that Hitler's death was announced. The family drove to Battle station to collect him, with union jacks fixed to the mudguards, the children shouting "liberated prisoner!" out of the car windows.

Norman had lost four stone. Rations for the Western soldiers had been a pint of mangel wurzel soup a day and one loaf of black bread a week. The Russian prisoners, unprotected by the Geneva convention, fared far worse; Norman watched, powerless, as they fought for scraps thrown over the wire by German housewives or crawled to the fence to try to reach the grass and dandelions on the other side. On Norman's 22nd birthday, the Polish officers

had clubbed together and given him a loaf of bread from their rations, an act of extreme generosity. The camp doctor, a Serbian officer, had to use boiled toilet paper as dressings, and perform amputations without anaesthetic.

On 7th May, Alan recorded "it was announced that nearly everywhere in Europe the enemy had surrendered & that tomorrow would be considered VE day. VE stands for Victory in Europe...the feeling of thankfulness and mental comfort grows". On 8th, after a lie-in, the family , "anticipating some of the petrol Norman is allowed drove to Fairlight going down London Road to the front to see the people and decorations". They ate their picnic tea at Fairlight in warm hazy weather overlooking the sea, the whole family together once more. Later, Whatlington church was full for an evening service of thanksgiving (in contrast to a congregation of 9 the previous Sunday!). After that, there was a meeting at Vinehall for all those who had served in the Home Guard, and a bonfire behind the Royal Oak.

Celebrations continued, with a dinner in the Village Hall for servicemen and women - Norman was warned that the Land Girl he was placed next to was "of easy virtue" ! - and a parade in Battle of all the Civilian Services- the St John's Ambulance Brigade, the Women's Voluntary Service, the Police, Air Raid Wardens, Land Army. Alan took part, wearing his First World War medals and marching with the Casualty Services. The parade started in the North Trade Road and ended with a service in front of the Abbey.

On July 21st, a party for Whatlington children was held at Hancox to celebrate victory (even though war in the Far East still continued). "There were races of various kinds, egg & spoon, sack, three-legged, all fours & ordinary on the tennis lawn" which was bumpy because there had been no petrol for the lawn mower for years. "The old pony gave rides. A man came & fixed up a gramophone with a loud speaker. The children had tea in the hall, perhaps 50 of them". Richard remembered, "there was an entertainment in the drawing room which was packed out. There was a conjuror and his wife who sang, did good mimicry and got my father, who loathed dancing, to perform the Hokey Cokey". Alan omitted this traumatic detail from his account of the event. He concluded, "a verse of Rule Britannia was sung. Then the money prizes for the races were given & each child as well had a bag of sweets or chocolate & 2 shillings. Then we sang a verse of the National Anthem. All who helped were beyond praise".

I wonder whether there are any "children" left who remember this event? If there are, I'd love to hear from them: charlotte @hancox59.plus.com.

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Also see: Hall, A and S (Eds.) Battle at War (2019)
http://www.bdhsarchives.com/Archives/Collectanea/J4.1%20World%20War%202%20Civilian%20deaths%20from%20the%20Battle%20District.pdf
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