



# BARNET HISTORY JOURNAL

## VE DAY SPECIAL



Many of the national and local events planned to commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the end of the Second World War in Europe on 8<sup>th</sup> May 1945 have had to be cancelled or curtailed due to the current Coronavirus epidemic. To help mark and remember this significant occasion Barnet Museum volunteers have produced this special issue of the History Society Journal to explore how residents of the town celebrated the breaking news at the time. We also pay tribute to the many local people who played their individual part in achieving that victory - including the 149 remembered by name on the Chipping Barnet war memorial which stands in the garden of St John the Baptist Church in the High Street.

However, we must also remember that - as Prime Minister Churchill acknowledged in his speeches at the time - the celebrations were tempered by the knowledge that the war continued in the far-east; the conflict would not finally end until 15<sup>th</sup> August 1945 - VJ Day.

## “Lest we forget”

The local celebrations began after knowledge of the German unconditional surrender to the Allied Expeditionary Force at 02.41 a.m. on 7<sup>th</sup> May began to circulate in England. An immediate ceasefire followed, and hostilities officially ended at midnight on Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> May.

Winston Churchill’s broadcast to the nation on the BBC at 15.00 p.m. that day officially announced the end of the war in Europe, and the Barnet Press reported how the news was received and celebrated the following Saturday under the banner headline:



A featured article - somewhat ironically surrounded by a border consisting of a series of small four-leaf clover like images that in retrospect look somewhat akin to the German Iron Cross - noted that “An appropriate reminder of our debt to those who have made the supreme sacrifice was given in a simple but effective display in the window of Mr Will Mather’s flower shop in Barnet High Street”. A vase of arum lillies and tulips was mounted on a plinth which stood symbolically on a Union Jack flag; a card headed ‘In remembrance’ read “In the midst of our rejoicing let us not forget those who have given their lives to bring about this great victory. This is in remembrance of those brave men and women”.

A page of news items went on to report and record a series of events that welcomed the news of victory across the town and in the surrounding areas in the days that followed. The Prime Minister’s speech was followed by “a merry peal on the bells of the Parish Church, sending a message of victory across town and country”.

A thanksgiving service followed that evening bringing together a congregation which also included worshippers from the town's Methodist, Congregational and Baptist churches, the service being relayed via loudspeakers concealed in the trees to several hundred townsfolk who had gathered around the war memorial in the Garden of Remembrance. Many stayed on to listen to King George VI's speech which was also relayed to the gathered crowds.

A large congregation also attended a VE Day service at Christ Church to hear the vicar's reading based on the text "The Lord has done great things for us, whereof we are glad".

The celebrations continued having started the previous evening as rumours of the impending formal announcement of victory began to spread. The main streets began to be festooned with flags and bunting; queues formed for bread to feed the children at the many street parties that would take place; the lorries of servicemen passing through the High Street were greeted enthusiastically; bonfires were lit on the many bomb sites around the town; and hotels and hostelrys were reported to have filled up rapidly.

It was noted that the following day "the celebrations struck a more subdued note.... most of the public houses had exhausted their supplies during the previous day's rejoicings, and the few that did open were so heavily besieged that their slender stocks soon ran out".

Local men of the Territorial Army had been called to action as the 334<sup>th</sup> (Barnet) Anti-aircraft company during preparations for the war in 1938, and the Barnet TA flag was recorded to be "flying proudly from the flagstaff at the Drill Hall as a reminder of the days before war broke over Europe". In a message to the paper Major the Hon. Carol Fellowes, the first officer commanding the company, wrote "The members of the company are now dispersed all over the world, but I think they would like to know that their flag was flying this historic day".

Two further items from the Press reports are also of note.

The first, a leading tribute headed 'The Greatest Victory' concluded with the words:

"Thanksgiving and high resolve are our sentiments today. Let us make them the foundations that we, as a chastened and more earnest race, can help to rebuild a world in which we can all live in peace and brotherhood".

The final extract from the press coverage published on 12<sup>th</sup> May 1945 is copied below - and serves as a reminder to us all that even as we remember the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of VE Day in May 2020 that it will be a further three months before the true end of World War Two will be acknowledged by the commemoration of the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of VJ Day on 15<sup>th</sup> August.

Those who hoped that the Hadley beacon would be lighted on VE-night were disappointed. They will have to wait until victory over Japan has been won.

Whether planning for such an event at St Mary's Church will even be possible given the current restrictions on public gatherings due to the Coronavirus pandemic remains to be seen - but let us hope that we just might see it, and other local events, take place by then.

## **“Let those that come after see to it that their names be not forgotten”**

So reads the motto of the Barnet War Memorials Association. Barnet Museum has sought to ensure that this aim is fulfilled by publishing their research recording information regarding the 275 First World War names of the fallen that are recorded on the Chipping Barnet memorial, together with the 149 from the 1939-1945 conflict mentioned earlier. The research has also included the names of the eight Old Boys of Christ Church School remembered on the memorial that stands outside the church in St Albans Road who perished during the Second Boer War of 1899-1902. We must also remember the many further names that appear on no less than eighteen other church and civic memorials that exist in the areas immediately surrounding Chipping Barnet.

Each and every person named played their own part in achieving the victory that would conclude each conflict, but it is perhaps appropriate to record here the names of a few of those remembered on the Chipping Barnet memorial for whom circumstance and history could be said to warrant a particular mention in respect of the Second World War.

The first casualty was Sergeant Pilot Richard Watkin (Dick) Adcock of the RAF Voluntary Reserve who died on 6<sup>th</sup> November 1939 aged 27 in a flying accident at Hatfield aerodrome and is buried in St Andrew's churchyard, Totteridge. The last casualty was Lance Corporal John Duncan Campbell Ford of the Scots Guards who died of pleurisy on 25<sup>th</sup> September 1945 aged 21 whilst serving with the Army of Occupation and is buried in the Cologne Southern Cemetery in Germany.

Sergeant Francis Beaumont Mitchell of the RAFVR, a Wireless Operator/Air Gunner, died on 27<sup>th</sup> September 1942 aged 25 when his aircraft crashed whilst landing in Oxfordshire on return from a training flight. Buried in Bells Hill cemetery, in 1941 he had narrowly survived an earlier accident on a remote mountain in Wales after which he was awarded the British Empire Medal for his part in saving the lives of other members of the crew despite being himself badly injured.

Others took part in operations that were to become famous both during and after the war. Captain Edward Peter Wentworth Dillon of the Royal Artillery died on 28<sup>th</sup> September 1943 aged 22 during the Allied invasion of Italy and is buried in Salerno War Cemetery. 'Operation Market Garden', the airborne attack at Arnhem in the Netherlands, would see Serjeant Harold Herbert Spencer of The Glider Pilot Regiment die on 18<sup>th</sup> September 1944 aged 30. He is buried there in the Oosterbeek War Cemetery.

We also pay tribute to the members of the public who died in air raids on the town during the war, each appearing in the Roll of Honour to the 66,375 Civil War dead of 1939-1945. Several local incidents would by good fortune see many lucky escapes as well as some deaths, but incidents such as the parachute mine that fell in Bells Hill on 15<sup>th</sup> November 1940, the V1 'doodlebug' attack at the Standard Telephones factory in Southgate on 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1944 and the V2 incident in Calton Road East Barnet on 20<sup>th</sup> January 1945 would regrettably result in the death of numerous men, women and children of Chipping Barnet.

**WE WILL REMEMBER THEM**