



# **Reflections on the sacrifices of a generation**

**for the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of  
Victory in Europe Day**

**8<sup>th</sup> May 2020**

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On 7<sup>th</sup> June 2019, the British Government announced that the early May Bank Holiday in 2020 would be moved from Monday 4<sup>th</sup> May to Friday 8<sup>th</sup> May to mark the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of VE Day. The purpose was to ensure that ***as many people as possible have the opportunity to remember and honour the heroes of the Second World War and reflect on the sacrifices of a generation.***

Unfortunately the widespread celebrations and public events that were planned have had to be cancelled because of the coronavirus pandemic.

## Introduction

This booklet has therefore been written to ensure that those who wish to can spend some quiet time reflecting on the Second World War and why "Victory in Europe" Day on 8<sup>th</sup> May 1945 was so important to so many.

It has been published electronically by the Bishop's Waltham Society on [www.bishopswalthamsociety.org.uk/](http://www.bishopswalthamsociety.org.uk/) and is in collaboration with Bishop's Waltham Museum who are holding a 'virtual' exhibition on their website at [www.bishopswalthammuseum.com](http://www.bishopswalthammuseum.com). The two are intended to complement each other, with the Museum's focus being more on the local rather than the national. Both documents can be downloaded from either website for you to read electronically, or to print out.

## The path to war

It is difficult for us to imagine how it must have felt in the summer of 1939 to be facing another World War just 20 years after the end of the last one, in November 1918. "The war to end all wars," as the Great War had been called, proved to be no such thing. Men and women who had served in the forces or worked in factories as 18-year olds, toward the end of the Great War, were still only in their late thirties that summer.

The memory of the slaughter in the trenches from bullet, shell and poison

gas lived on. Just over 700,000 British soldiers had died and over one and a half million carried war wounds serious enough to have been recorded, often severe. No family had remained untouched.

### **A longing for peace**

So it is perhaps not surprising that despite the rise of fascism and nationalism in Germany, Italy and Japan in the early/mid 1930s, there was no appetite for war. The desire for peace was perhaps epitomised in early 1933 by a debate at the Oxford Union Society on the motion "This House will under no circumstances fight for its King and country." It passed with 275 votes for the motion and 153 against it.

In 1934 the Peace Pledge Union was founded in Britain which, over the next five years, became a mass movement that campaigned against war. When a centre-left government, the Popular Front, was elected in France in 1936, a million Frenchmen marched through Paris demanding peace. In the US, Congress adopted the Neutrality Law that was designed to prevent the United States from giving money, economic aid, or arms to any combatant state.

The passivity of the liberal democracies, who had fought together as allies in the Great War, encouraged the militarism of the fascist and nationalistic regimes that held little respect for democracy. Japan seized Manchuria and then invaded China, Italy invaded Ethiopia and Germany sent troops into Vienna to ensure a merger with Austria and then demanded the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia. But Joseph Chamberlain's September 1938 Munich Treaty, which gave Hitler the Sudetenland as the price for "Peace in our time", was to be the last act of appeasement.

### **Accepting the possibility of war**

During the winter of 1938/9 the British and French governments signed defence pacts with Romania, Poland and Greece. Rearmament, which had started rather desultorily in 1935 as a way to help British industry recover from the Great Depression, was stepped up and

preparations for possible war were made. For example in February 1939 the so-called Anderson air raid shelter, designed to accommodate up to six people, started to be distributed. The main principle of protection was based on curved and straight galvanised corrugated steel panels bolted together with earth piled on top. Between February 1939 and the outbreak of war in September 1939 some 1.5 million such shelters were distributed to the poor in society (those earning less than £5 a week).



**A family, carrying gas mask boxes, try out their Anderson shelter**

Then on 13<sup>th</sup> March, German troops marched into Czechoslovakia, occupying Bohemia and establishing a protectorate over Slovakia. Hitler then made territorial demands on Lithuania and Poland. The policy of appeasement was seen to have failed and another war suddenly loomed large. On 31<sup>st</sup> March Britain pledged support to Poland in the event of an invasion; on 4<sup>th</sup> April the Royal Armoured Corps was formed, a week later the Women's Royal Naval Service was re-established. A fortnight later the Military Training Act was passed introducing conscription – after 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1939 all men aged 20 and 21 would have to undertake six months military training and be liable to call-up for four years military service. As summer arrived with temperatures close to 30°C in that first week of June, the people of Britain knew that their country would have to face the reality of war with Germany again. A prospect few relished.

### The pace quickens...

On 28<sup>th</sup> June the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) was created, and on 1<sup>st</sup> July the Women's Land Army was reformed to work on farms as they had done in the Great War. Once again they would become known as the Land Girls. In mid-August the first members of the Government Code and Cypher School moved to Bletchley Park. On 24<sup>th</sup> August the Emergency Powers (Defence) Act 1939 came into force, Parliament was recalled, Army reservists were called up and Civil Defence workers placed on alert. On the 30<sup>th</sup> August the Royal Navy proceeded to war stations.

### And then it happens

At dawn on Friday 1<sup>st</sup> September the German army crossed the Polish border and started the Nazi invasion of Poland. Whilst the British and French governments decided how to respond, "Operation Pied Piper", the 4-day evacuation of 3.5 million children and teachers, as well as expectant and nursing mothers, from London and other major UK cities began immediately.



***DON'T do it,  
Mother—***

**LEAVE THE CHILDREN  
WHERE THEY ARE**

ISSUED BY THE MINISTRY OF HEALTH

On the same day a blackout was imposed across Britain and the Army was officially mobilised. At 11 o'clock in the morning two days later, when he had received no German reply to his ultimatum to withdraw from Poland, Neville Chamberlain, speaking from Downing Street, announced on BBC Radio that the United Kingdom was now at war with Germany. "This morning the British Ambassador in Berlin handed the German government a final note stating that, unless we heard from them by eleven o'clock that they were prepared at once to withdraw their troops from Poland, a state of war would exist between us. I have to tell you now that no such undertaking has been received, and that consequently this country is at war with Germany."

General mobilisation of the armed forces began and National Service was introduced for all men aged 18 to 41.



### **Fear of aerial bomb and gas attacks on civilians**

Public opinion in the 1930s was horrified at this prospect of massive bombing of major cities.

Germany had sent the Condor Legion, a powerful unit made up of Luftwaffe (air force) and Wehrmacht (army) personnel, to assist General Franco's Nationalists

during the Spanish Civil War (July 1936 to March 1939).

It proved to be an excellent testing ground for men, machinery and the tactics required of modern warfare. Amongst them was the use of heavy bombing on civilian targets in a new form of Total War. This was exemplified by the devastating bombing and strafing, by German aircraft, of the Basque town of Guernica which left many casualties and a fire that destroyed about three-quarters of its buildings. Not only did this prompt Pablo Picasso's famous painting of "Guernica" but it achieved huge international press coverage. The war reporting of this particular incident, much of it in gory detail, created a new, worldwide fear of air attack.

Because the Germans had used poison gas in the Great War, it was assumed they would drop gas on civilians so the manufacture of face-masks for every man, woman and child began in 1938. In addition to those needed by the armed forces and other frontline individuals, 38 million masks were ordered. This and the early distribution of Anderson shelters, the immediate evacuation of children and the implementation of a countrywide blackout were reflections of the government's fears.

But the people's psyche had also been affected. For example, Neville Shute, a local author, wrote a book called "What Happened to the Corbetts", a fictional depiction of the effect of aerial bombing on Southampton. Written in 1938 it was published in April 1939. It described the effect and aftermath of bombing, such as the spread of disease from lack of clean water, and the flight of city dwellers to the countryside bringing the threat of cholera and worse with them. On the initial day of publication, a thousand copies of the novel were distributed free of charge to members of the Air Raid Precautions (ARP) teams to inform them of what they might expect. Thankfully many of Shute's predictions did not come to pass!

### **How did people react?**

Required by law to carry their gas masks at all times – subject to an immediate

fine – the nation watched sandbags being piled up around building entrances. The tops of some post boxes were painted green that would turn red if there had been a gas attack and dustbin lids were hung on walls with the same paint to warn people to put on their masks.

However, panic was a rarity. Official histories have concluded that the mental health of the nation may have improved once war actually started. Pre-war dire predictions of mass air-raid neurosis were not borne out. Predictions had underestimated the adaptability and resourcefulness of the ordinary citizen and there were many new civil defence roles such as Air Raid Warden that gave a sense of fighting back rather than despair.

But perhaps the most bizarre insight into the mental state of the country, at the outbreak of a new war, is the now expunged memory that in the first four days after war was declared no less than 400,000 cats and dogs in London were put down in a mass euthanasia. That was a quarter of London's pet population! It appears to have happened spontaneously since it was not part of any government directive – indeed government sought to stop it, not least because it caused a shortage of chloroform and a refuse disposal problem. With queues of half a mile long forming outside Vet's surgeries it would seem to have been a response to the need to "do something" and reflected a populace terrified by the new reality of war with the potential havoc of air raids and food shortages. Thankfully people started to realise their mistake and the killing stopped.

### **And so it began**

A dry, warm and rather sunny September proved to be the start of six years of bloody warfare across the globe. A long, dark tunnel. A tunnel which, at the outset, had only a flicker of light at the end of it. "We're Going to Hang out the Washing on the Siegfried Line" (a line of German fortifications) may have been sung in October 1939 as an expression of courage, but it proved to

be a triumph of hope over experience. The early wartime years were grim.

## **The War**

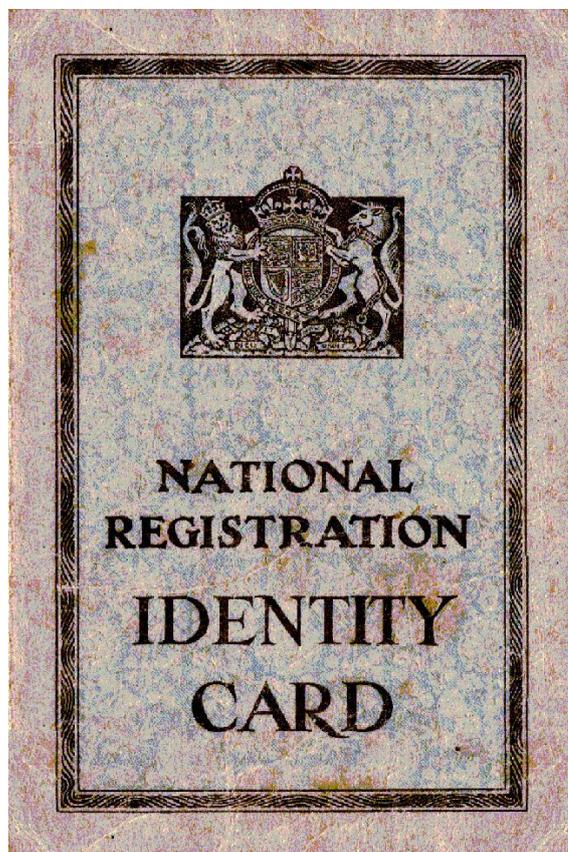
What follows is a very selective set of dates and events that are intended simply to show the ebb and flow of war from 1939 to 1945 – six long years.

Those who lived through it would have felt each twist and turn as it affected them, those they loved and, in a wider context, the country's prospects as a whole. In this sequence of events it is possible to discern the changing fortunes of what was Total War!

### **The first year: September 1939- August 1940**

#### **September (1939)**

- \* The start of the so-called "Phoney War" – the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) began to move to France on 4<sup>th</sup> September to take up position alongside the French Army, but no serious fighting took place until the spring of 1940.
- \* National Registration Act is passed, introducing identity cards for all citizens.



- \* Petrol rationing introduced (it continued until May 1950)

## January

- \* Food rationing introduced on butter, bacon and sugar



## April

- \* Germany invades Denmark and Norway, British forces withdraw from Norway in May

## May

- \* German "Blitzkrieg" (Lightning War) begins with invasion of Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg
- \* German army bypasses French Maginot Line and sweeps into France
- \* Winston Churchill becomes Prime Minister in an all-party coalition

"I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat. We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have before us many, many long months of struggle and of suffering. You ask, what is our policy? I can say: It is to wage war, by sea, land and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us; to wage war against a monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime. This is our policy. You ask, what is our aim?"

I can answer in one word: It is victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be, for without victory, there is no survival."

**Winston Churchill May 1940**

- \* Large part of British Expeditionary Force evacuated from Dunkirk – over 338,000 soldiers, from different nations, were lifted from the harbour and the beach between 27<sup>th</sup> May and 4<sup>th</sup> June. 226 of the 693 boats involved were sunk, 170 of them being the "small boats" sent to help

"Even though large tracts of Europe and many old and famous states have fallen or may fall into the grip of the Gestapo and all the odious apparatus of Nazi rule, we shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender."

**Winston Churchill June 1940**

- \* Threat of invasion becomes obvious, Home Guard formed

## June

- \* Italy declares war on Britain and France
- \* In the UK all Italian men aged 17 to 60 are arrested and interned. Mobs attack Italian businesses and families, especially in large cities
- \* France surrenders on 22<sup>nd</sup> June
- \* 25,000 Channel Island refugees arrive in England

"The battle of France is over. I expect that the Battle of Britain is about to begin. Upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilisation. Upon it depends our own British life, and the long continuity of our institutions and our Empire. The whole fury and might of the enemy must very soon be turned upon us. Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this island or lose the war."

**Winston Churchill June 1940**

## July

- \* Hitler issues the order for the invasion of Britain (Operation Sealion)
- \* The Battle of Britain begins with an attack by 3,000 German aircraft. RAF out-numbered 4 to 1

- \* Regulations passed allowing the Minister of Labour to ban strike action

“The gratitude of every home in our Island, in our Empire, and indeed throughout the world, except in the abodes of the guilty, goes out to the British airmen who, undaunted by odds, unwearied in their constant challenge and mortal danger, are turning the tide of the World War by their prowess and by their devotion. Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.”

**Winston Churchill August 1940**

### **The second year: September 1940- August 1941**

#### **September**

- \* Italy invades Egypt
- \* Blitz on London and other cities begins and continues to May 1941



#### **October**

- \* Battle of Britain ends
- \* Unable to achieve air superiority, Hitler cancels the invasion of Britain

#### **November**

- \* Luftwaffe conduct air raid on Coventry that lasts for 10 hours
- \* British and Commonwealth forces start offensive against Italians in Egypt

#### **January**

- \* Italians forced out of Egypt

#### **February**

- \* German Afrika Corps under General Rommel clash with allied forces in western desert

#### **May**

- \* Blitz ends – a million houses damaged or destroyed in London and 40,000 civilians dead

#### **June**

- \* Clothes rationing introduced for the first time
- \* Germany invades Russia

### **The third year: September 1941 – August 1942**

#### **September**

- \* British convoys to Russia start

“We stood all alone a year ago, and to many countries it seemed that our account was closed, we were finished... Very different is the mood today. Britain, other nations thought, had drawn a sponge across her slate. But instead our country stood in the gap. There was no flinching and no thought of giving in; and by what seemed almost a miracle to those outside these Islands, though we ourselves never doubted it, we now find ourselves in a position where I say that we can be sure that we have only to persevere to conquer.”

**Winston Churchill October 1941**

#### **December**

- \* 18<sup>th</sup> Dec 41 The National Service (No. 2) Act is passed. All men and women aged 18-60 are now liable to some form of national service, including military service for those under 51.
- \* Japanese attack Pearl Harbour
- \* Britain and America declare war on Japan
- \* Germany declares war on America

#### **February**

- \* Fall of Singapore. After just 7 days the “Impregnable Fortress” of Singapore surrenders to the Japanese. In what Winston Churchill describes as the “worst disaster” and “largest capitulation” in British history, around 80,000 Commonwealth troops are taken prisoners of war.

#### **April**

- \* Luftwaffe begin “Baedeker raids”, targets are chosen for their historic and cultural significance; Exeter, Bath, Canterbury, Lincoln and York

#### **June**

- \* Tobruk captured by Rommel’s Panzer Army Afrika. Churchill called the defeat a “disgrace”. 35,000 Allied troops taken prisoner and Rommel is promoted Field Marshal.

## July

\* The basic civilian petrol ration was abolished, making fuel unavailable to private car owners.

## August

\* Battle of Stalingrad begins

\* American forces land at Guadalcanal in the Pacific

## The fourth year September 1942 – August 1943

### October

\* Battle of El Alamein in Egypt – a major Allied victory. Church bells were rung in celebration all over the United Kingdom for the first time since May 1940

Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning. Henceforth Hitler's Nazis will meet equally well armed, and perhaps better armed troops. Henceforth they will have to face in many theatres of war that superiority in the air which they have so often used without mercy against others, of which they boasted all round the world, and which they intended to use as an instrument for convincing all other peoples that all resistance to them was hopeless....

**Winston Churchill October 1943**

## November

\* Allied seaborne invasion of North Africa traps Rommel between General Montgomery's 8<sup>th</sup> Army and the Allied invasion force

## January

\* The German VI Army surrenders at Stalingrad, 91,000 taken prisoner

## February

\* After six months of fierce fighting on land, sea and air, Guadalcanal is taken by American forces. The campaign ended Japanese expansion plans and perhaps signified the turning point of the war in the Pacific theatre.

## March

\* The worst period for Allied shipping in the Battle of the Atlantic. 82 ships were sunk by German U-boats in March and a further 39 in April

## May

\* German Army in North Africa surrenders 134,000 prisoners

## July

\* Allied forces invade Sicily

\* Mussolini arrested by Italian State

\* An allied bombing raid on Hamburg kills 34,000 people in a firestorm that destroys most of the city

\* Announcement that women aged from 19 to 50 will be called up to work in plane factories and munitions plants.

\* Men eligible for military service allowed to choose to work in coal mines instead

## August

\* German troops pour into Italy to stop the country from surrendering

## The fifth year: September 1943 – August 1944

### September

\* Allied invasion of mainland Italy begins

\* Ministry of Health announces that there was more than a 30% increase in births between 1941 and 1942. Infant mortality was 49 per 1,000, the lowest on record for Britain

### November

\* Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt meet in Tehran to set the direction for the rest of the war in Europe



## December

\* Villages in the South Hams area of Devon were compulsorily evacuated to create a training area for the planned D-Day landings.

## May

\* Soviet Union forces drive the last German forces from Russian soil

\* American forces break out of their Anzio beachhead and begin their drive to Rome

## June

\* Americans enter Rome

\* D-Day: Allied forces land in France

“I have also to announce to the House that during the night and the early hours of this morning the first of the series of landings in force upon the European Continent has taken place. In this case the liberating assault fell upon the coast of France. An immense armada of upwards of 4,000 ships, together with several thousand smaller craft, crossed the Channel. Massed airborne landings have been successfully effected behind the enemy lines, and landings on the beaches are proceeding at various points at the present time.”

**Winston Churchill June 1944**

- \* First German V1 rocket lands in Britain – V1s would kill 20,000 civilians

### **July**

- \* Russian forces enter Poland
- \* An attempt by senior German Army officers to kill Hitler fails

### **August**

- \* Paris is liberated

## **The sixth year: September 1944 – August 1945**

### **September**

- \* The Blackout is replaced by a partial 'dim-out'
- \* Brussels and Antwerp liberated
- \* The first German V2 rocket lands in Britain
- \* The Battle for the bridge at Arnhem is lost

### **December**

- \* The Home Guard is stood down

### **January**

- \* The Battle of the Bulge, Germany's last throw, fails and its army in the west falls back to German soil

### **February**

- \* Battle for Iwo Jima ends with only 1,000 of the 20,000 Japanese defendants taken alive

### **March**

- \* British and American troops cross the Rhine
- Last V1 and V2 rockets land on British soil

### **April**

- \* Russian forces take Vienna
- \* 370,000 German soldiers surrender in the Ruhr

- \* With Soviet troops less than 500 metres from his Führerbunker, Adolf Hitler commits suicide

### **May**

- \* Berlin surrenders to the Russian army
- \* The German VII army surrenders
- \* The new Head of State, Admiral Karl Dönitz, authorises the unconditional surrender of the armed forces of Nazi Germany

“Yesterday morning at 2:41 a.m. at General Eisenhower's Headquarters, General Jodl, the representative of the German High Command, and of Grand Admiral Dönitz, the designated head of the German State, signed the act of unconditional surrender of all German land, sea, and air forces in Europe to the Allied Expeditionary Force, and simultaneously to the Soviet High Command.”

**Winston Churchill May 1945**

## **\* Victory in Europe (VE) Day celebrated on 8<sup>th</sup> May**



**Large crowds gathered to celebrate – as here at Piccadilly Circus in London**

The war in the Far East against Japan continued and this booklet will be revised and re-issued in time for the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Victory over Japan (VJ) Day on 15<sup>th</sup> August 2020.

## **On the home front...**

The country itself was clearly exhausted, drab and badly damaged. Two million homes had been destroyed by German

bombing; 2¼ million people had been made homeless and 45,000 civilians had lost their lives, including 8000 children.

In order to fund the war, the country had sold its gold and dollar reserves and by the end of 1940 these were close to exhausted. Just in time Roosevelt persuaded the US administration to fund Britain's war effort and in March 1941 "Lend-Lease" was introduced whereby America would give Britain supplies totalling \$31.4 billion which did not have to be repaid. It was a life-saver.

But the country had thrown everything into the effort. Garden railings had been removed for their scrap metal and aluminium kitchen saucepans were collected for their potential in the aircraft industry. Even bones and rags had been collected for their glue and cotton content.



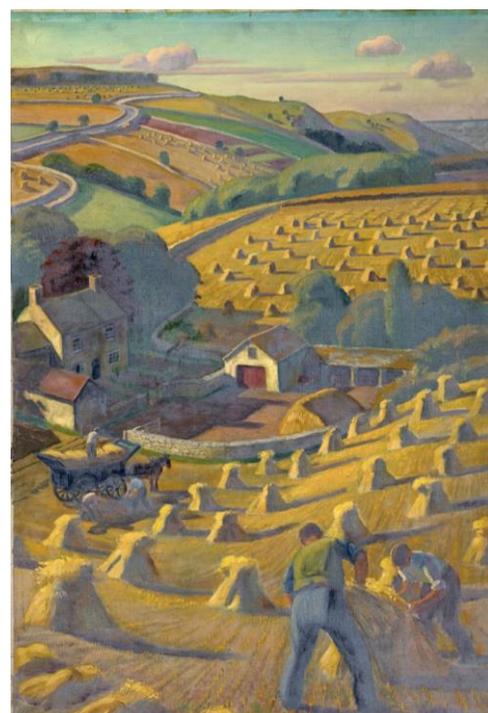
Based on the experience of the First World War, Britain excelled in allocating resources and ramping up production. It was the most fully mobilized nation, economically, in the entire war and remained so throughout. By 1941 GDP was 21% greater than in 1938.

Indeed, although much is made of German industry's ability to produce war material in the form of tanks, guns and

planes, the UK outperformed consistently once war broke out. For instance, during the Battle of Britain, while British factories produced 2,354 new planes, the Germans produced just 975. In fact Britain consistently out-produced Germany in aircraft, ships, artillery, submarines, lorries, and even wheat and potatoes!

Rationing had been essential for a number of reasons. Before the war Britain imported 70% of its food – over 20 million tons a year. The country imported more than half its meat and relied on imported feed to support its own domestic meat production. The German U-boat fleet was designed to strangle merchant shipping and starve Britain into surrender. So rationing was designed to share out what limited food there was equally – equality of sacrifice was regarded as essential.

In fact British farmers had increased land use by nearly 50% – from 12 to 18 million acres – and the farm labour force had been expanded by a fifth, thanks to the Land Girls from to the Women's Land Army. As a result agricultural production increased 35% during the war and, in terms of calories, domestic output nearly doubled. So despite rationing the British were relatively well fed during the war, even though they ate 36% less meat but ate over 80% more wheat and nearly 100% more potatoes.



To supplement rations, a large drive for people to grow their own fruit and vegetables, under the slogan Dig for Victory, was undertaken. As a result, about 1.4 million allotments were created and many people turned their gardens into vegetable gardens. Keeping a few hens was commonplace and even a pig was not unknown.



Rationing had required that each customer choose the shops they would use and register with them. The shops then provided the ration book containing coupons that were only useable at that shop. So the shopkeeper was then provided with enough food for registered customers. Purchasers had to take ration books with them when shopping, so that the relevant coupon or coupons could be cancelled. In the days before supermarkets, this meant choosing a butcher, a baker, a grocery shop, and so on. Queuing was common and it was not unknown for people to stand in a queue for a long period only to find that what they wanted had sold out. Since neither fish nor potatoes were rationed, fish and chip shops flourished.

As the war progressed, rationing was extended to other commodities such as clothing (June 1941), which was rationed on a points system. In the beginning the allowance was enough for about one new outfit per year but as the war progressed, the points were reduced

until buying a coat used almost a year's clothing coupons. Make and mend became essential!

'Utility' clothing had also been introduced to conserve materials. The government took control of the import and manufacture of raw materials and manufacturers produced a limited range of garments using this 'Utility' material. The style of garments was also subject to austerity regulations in order to restrict how much cloth was used. For example, the number of pockets were restricted, a maximum length for men's shirts was introduced and a ban placed on turn-ups for men's trousers.

Throughout the war there had been a blackout, with every window having curtains or blinds made of black material so that no chinks of light showed – something constantly policed by Air Raid Wardens. All windows were also taped to make sure that injuries from flying glass were minimised. With few cars, no streetlights and little sound, cities, towns and villages were dark and sombre places – making the sound of approaching aircraft all the more threatening.



Living through the war had been a tremendous effort by all sections of society. Apart from those on the frontline, older generations had joined the Home Guard or become Air Raid Wardens, women had joined the Land Army, laboured in factories or worked in shops while some younger men had gone down the coal mines.



## The VE Day Celebrations themselves

In many ways the celebrations that went on all day and all night on 8<sup>th</sup> May 1945 were a reflection of what had NOT happened for six long and exhausting years of war. For the first time in six years the morning papers carried weather forecasts, fireworks were set off, hoarding pulled down and bonfires set alight in the streets, while the police just stood by. Important buildings like Buckingham Palace and Big Ben were suddenly illuminated and two searchlights formed a V-shaped pair of beams over St Paul's Cathedral. Music filled the streets and people let their hair down, kissing, singing and dancing with complete strangers.

Cigarettes and alcohol had never been rationed but often ran short. VE Day was no different. Apparently Churchill had checked with the Ministry of Food that there would be enough beer in the capital, but any reassurance he received was misplaced – beer ran out well before the extended closing hours in most London pubs.

However celebrations on this scale were largely confined to the cities and larger towns. The social research organisation, Mass Observation, noted that, "On VE night most people were either at home, at small private parties, at indoor dances or in public houses or collected in small

groups round bonfires, where there was some singing but by no means riotous." Many had cause for sad reflection.

By the end of the war over 4.5 million men and women served in the British armed services. In the European theatre of war, thousands of fathers, sons and daughters had died in the armed conflict. Many of these were buried overseas.

"Let us remember those who will not come back... let us remember the men in all the services and the women in all the services, who have laid down their lives. We have come to the end of our tribulations and they are not with us at the moment of our rejoicing."

**King George VI 8<sup>th</sup> May 1945**

Thousands more were prisoners of war in the chaos of war-torn Europe or the ghastly conditions of the Japanese camps. Families could only hope they would survive.

Many thousands of civilians – either as families or firemen, air raid wardens, ambulance drivers, merchant navy personnel – had also died during the bombing and devastation of war. VE Day prompted many relatives to put flowers on their graves.

For many there was a dull numbness of relief that the bloodletting, in at least one theatre of war, was over. A sense of exhaustion was probably tinged by a desire to go back to normality, when it was all too obvious that pre-war norms would not return.

### A footnote...

Within two months of VE Day, and before victory had been secured against Japan, Britain held a General Election. It took place on 5<sup>th</sup> July, although the counting of votes was delayed until 26<sup>th</sup> July to allow overseas votes (of which there were many thousand) to reach Britain. The result was an unexpected landslide victory for Labour who made a net gain of 239 seats and won 47.7% of the vote. The Conservatives, under Churchill, had a net loss of 189 seats.