

CHAPTER 11: SPITFIRE, RADAR AND WAR.

West Dean Park and the Estate did not escape from the effects of the Second World War; there were many incidents of note which occurred. The first noteworthy and historical event was the crash of an aircraft on the western hill above Kendall's farm. It was winter time in the early part of 1939. This was the first time I heard the name Spitfire. The Vickers Armstrong Super Marine Spitfire; designed by Reginald Mitchell. For a number of year's before, he had designed and practiced with competition streamlined single seater racing planes; all in the design manner culminating in the military use Spitfire. The famous fighter plane was used extensively during The Battle of Britain and the rest of the war. It was a very secret happening and although I tried to walk up there to look; army check points were posted on all the roads and lanes to stop looky-loos; whilst they searched for every scrap of the crashed plane. However, after a few days had passed, when the soldiers had gone, I went up and looked around. There on the hill top was a long gouge in the ground, exposing the white chalk rock; ending in a hole burst through a bank and a hedge. I managed to find one black and shiny piece of metal and this was the first piece to start my war relic collection. It is possible the crashed Spitfire was being used for low level Radar (RDF) testing, when it hit the top of the hill. Nothing more of real significance in the village happened after that, until Britain declared war on Germany, on the 3rd of September 1939. Shortly after all the young men of the village disappeared; they were conscripted into the military. The all male Estate 'Bothy House' residence, emptied of young men who worked in the kitchen gardens and the park for the same reason.

My Dad was instructed by his boss to give assistance to the military services and government officials.

Just after the war broke out a battalion of soldiers came and pitched their camouflaged bell tents in the Walnut Field on Chalk Pit Lane, together with a cook house and toilets. They had a number of lorries, a couple of Bren gun carriers and motor bikes. They let me drive a lorry around the field and this gave them some merriment because at 10 year's old, it was quite a handful, the steering was heavy and my directional handling was not good. It was my first driving experience. I don't know for sure what they were doing in the area; they wouldn't tell and if my Dad knew, he certainly would not tell me. He could be counted on to keep a secret, There were two local projects of a military nature going on at that time; one was the housing of munitions in the West Dean Railway tunnel: the train was arriving and departing regularly at the

southern end. Also, the building of the wooden Radar (Radio Direction Finding 'RDF) towers and under and over ground buildings for this, on the top of nearby Trundle Hill. Soldiers of the Royal Engineers Brigade, who replaced the young men in The Bothy, certainly worked on the Radar project. They did not tell me but I watched where they went. The train station stored military supplies.

In a very short time, only old people were left working on the Estate; there was my Dad, Mr. Lyne the Head Gardener, Mr. Field the Head Gamekeeper, the Estate Agent, Mr. Reid the Estate Manager, Mr. Glaister the chauffer-driver and the Estate Foreman, Mr Morgan. There were a few female house-staff left in the main house. Some elderly Estate workers came to work from the village in the kitchen gardens, the park and the saw mill, but the park maintenance activities were substantially reduced. The cowmen and carters on the farm were too old for military service.

As I have already described, Edward James the owner of West Dean Estate fled to America just after the Declaration of War against Germany. Of course, Home Farm continued its operation and normal routine work but other West Dean Estate activities and work diminished radically. The water dried up in the ponds under the pergolas at the west side of the main house and the goldfish died. The field between the main house and the river Lavant was no longer mowed regularly and was allowed to grow up and was cut to produce hay each war year. The gold, silver and Chinese pheasants in St. Roches Arboretum were let out to fend for themselves. Pheasant rearing stopped and those remaining were also left to fend for themselves. The Arboretum and the golf course became neglected. James had formed a temporary group of trustees, consisting of the Estate Agent and some farmers to administer the Estate. They continued to shoot some game annually.

I heard the new word bandied around; Radar. No one talked to me about what was going on but I picked up scraps of information by listening to others. The Royal Engineers lived in the Bothy and Captain Harradine of the same regiment came to stay with us in our farmhouse. They were responsible for building the four wooden Radar aerial towers; about 100' tall and buildings on the highest hill near us called, Trundle Hill: this was part of the triangulated antennae system to intercept aircraft. Soon after, one evening at dusk, two very tall men appeared at our front door without warning. They introduced themselves as naval Commander 'this' and naval Commander 'that'; I don't remember their family names but they were both very tall, imposing and

impressive to a ten year old boy like me. They asked if they could stay with us for a few days. Not easy, we already housed Capt. Harradine, However, it was war time and they camped out in our parlour, with its separate door for coming and going any time of day or night Our country living conditions were fairly primitive, particularly for army and navy officers but they chose our isolated home for surreptitious accommodation. They only slept in our house and they ate and did their ablutions somewhere else. Their vehicles were hidden around the farm buildings and under the beech wood trees. They were always gone from before daylight to return around dusk and I saw very little of them. This work ethic of individuals, working long hours, ignoring hardship, indicates the enormous devotion to duty and pressure of time value to get the war jobs done and to benefit the defense process. Once again I was sworn to secrecy by my Dad and told not to mention our visitors to anyone outside in the village and at school.

Apart from the foregoing war like operations very little happened of a war nature during the very cold winter of 1939-40. There was plenty of snow in the Park and I spent many happy hours sledding down the hill in front of West Dean House. At that time there was only a skeleton staff living in the house and no visitors; I had the whole park to myself. Captain Harradine's wife came and stayed with him for some periods of time and she brought their large and handsome chestnut colour show horses, they were about seventeen hands high. They let me ride and I was thrilled to take the opportunity.

For most of the war to my chagrin, I had to sleep in my parent's bedroom because of the transient military personnel that frequently came and stayed with us.

Apart from the Radar installations, the West Dean tunnel activities and the general movement of soldiers and their equipment up and down the main village road; still nothing much happened. However, my ear was always glued to the radio, listening to the news of the war happening elsewhere. The radio and newspapers were the main source of news in those days and the radio was more immediate. Neville Chamberlain was Britain's Prime Minister before the war and he went to see Adolph Hitler after Germany took over Austria and invaded Czeckoslovakia. Hitler assured Chamberlain that he would not invade any other country and particularly Poland. He signed a piece of paper to that effect; re-assuring Chamberlain and the British Government. Chamberlain was able to brag in late August, when he returned to England on September the first 1939, that he, ".....held a piece of paper, signed by Mr. Hitler himself saying that he would not invade other countries." The next day Germany invaded Poland and because we had a

protectionist treaty with them; Prime Minister Chamberlain announced on the radio at 11 am on September the third 1939 that Britain was at war with Germany. People, especially older ones, went about their daily work and business looking shocked and stunned. After all, the First World War was a recent memory for many people, when great hardship had occurred and many families lost loved ones. My Mother's first husband was killed in France and so was her brother. The British Government had not really prepared the public for the oncoming war, which they had been planning discreetly to engage in by their own preparations for several years. IE: The National Service Act to conscript men into the military service was passed into law in 1937. Spitfires were put into war production in 1937. At my present age and upon reflection, I am not convinced that Britain at that moment in time, should have gone to war with Germany. We should have waited until Hitler had embroiled himself more with Russia and Britain was more prepared. Also the US would have probably and eventually joined the fight. However this is a consideration that undoubtedly will stir great debate among many historians and people in general with differing viewpoints.

The 6 pm news on the BBC was always preceded by the 'pip-pip-pip' sounds and the first few bars of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony; which goes: 'Bim, bim bim-daaaaah': the letter 'V' in Morse Code and Churchill's famous finger's 'V' sign, indicating 'V for Victory'. This was a propaganda ploy aimed at the Nazis and Adolph Hitler because of the 'V' implication and Beethoven was a revered German. Of course there was news of the war; The British Expeditionary Force (BEF) were ignominiously defeated in France and we only just managed to rescue most of the soldiers from Dunkirk beaches; leaving behind all their military equipment. Hundreds of little fishing boats, even from our local harbours, went over there and helped save them. Most of our Hurricane fighter planes were sent over to France to try and defend our forces from German bomber planes but nearly all of them were shot down and lost. The German army had skirted the southern end of the Maginot Line of defense; the Vichy French Government did not encumber them and they simply and rapidly advanced up through France.

I made friends with an evacuee from Portsmouth, Ron Eldridge, we found a young rooster chick on the road coming home from school; it had probably fallen out of a farm vehicle on its way to market. We decided our war effort would be to raise and fatten this unfortunate creature, then, sell him to the butcher. We actually accomplished this and with some sad misgivings he was duly sold for three shillings and sixpence. Not a bad deal! Remember, that

was a day's wages for a young 'game beater'. Sweets were one penny a quarter pound weight and there were twelve pennies in a shilling and twenty shillings in a pound sterling.

It is memorable that the famous late John Inman, the actor in *Are You being Served*, was evacuated to our village and came to our school and I befriended him as well. I wish he was still alive so that I could contact him. A number of other evacuees arrived in the village, billeted at some of the workers houses. Suddenly there were London cockney and Portsmouth accents around the village and the school. However, since the war never got serious during the 1939-40 winter, many went back home and then, when the bombs started falling they returned.

An office company called Butterworth and Co., publishers of *The Justice of the Peace* journal was also evacuated from London and took up residence in West Dean House. They were the publisher's of the records of all that was said and done in court proceedings from all over Great Britain. Quite soon after the war started they moved office furniture and equipment into West Dean House. They took over most of the West Wing of the house; including the bedrooms, reception rooms and the cellars, where they kept their archives for the duration of the war. They chose this quiet and secluded location in common with the military departments that came and used West Dean Park. Typesetting and printing were done in the reception rooms and the offices were in the bedrooms. About twenty, mostly female workers, either lived in the north east servants wing or were billeted with village families. Mr. Emery the Editor in Chief of Butterworth and Co., lived in the late Mrs. Montgomery's thatched house, which was situated on the main road opposite the railway station driveway. I became friends with his son David and went to tea with the family a number of times.

This commercialization of the James's family estate, was the start of a trend that was never reversed; after Butterworth's returned to London at the end of the war and after some time, Whisper's girls school took up space there. It was the beginning of the end of an opulent and extraordinary history of some 'very landed gentry'.

Once again! I was sworn to secrecy by my Dad, regarding this occupation of West Dean House and mentioning the name of the company occupying the residence was taboo. I never went into the house after that time until I later took my first job with Butterworth's towards the end of the war.

Another interesting female character arrived to work on the two farms owned by Mr. Coker for the duration of the war; she came about the first part of 1940. This was a 'Land Girl'.

She lived for the most part at Binderton Farm House but came on occasion to help out at Home Farm. The National Army of Land Girls were sponsored and subsidized by the Government to fill the gap left by the men leaving the farms for military service. They fitted them out with a special hat, various boots and shoes, an overcoat and rain coat, shirts, jackets and breeches. I remember, our 'Land Girl' was rather well endowed across the backside and the breeches were very tight. Unfortunately, she could not milk cows, was afraid of horses, could not drive a tractor, had limited ladylike strength and she did not stay long. Coker, the farmer was obliged to pay the wages of this lady of limited use and so she was obliged to leave.

Ration Books with stamps for food inside were issued by the Government to each person including children. We were fortunate because, certain farming people like us, were given extra rations of sugar, so that we could continue to make preserves from our crops that needed sweetening. We children were suddenly unable to get as many sweets to indulge in. Perhaps that is why some elderly English people today who were children then, have good teeth. I remember bananas and oranges were not available during the war years; neither ice creams nor Cadbury's chocolate were available..

Meat was, of course, rationed, so anything extra from an extraneous source was most acceptable.

We still continued to shoot rabbits, pigeons and young rooks; sometimes a hare, pheasant or partridge was presented to us by the Head Gamekeeper. I suspect he was a part beneficiary of the slaughtered pig.

A young man called John Kidner came to assist on the farms, I believe he was exempt from military service because of medical reasons. He, my Dad, the Head Gamekeeper and others were permitted by The Estate Agent to hunt and shoot fallow deer in West Dean Woods during the war. Thus more meat was available to us. I was not allowed to go on these hunts, because of the danger of getting shot. I was about the same height as the deer. I believe someone did receive some stray buckshot later, after which the 'shoots' ceased. Anyway I helped disembowel, skin and quarter the venison body; this took place in the farm's main feed storage barn. The meat was very lean and tasted of garlic; from eating the wild garlic which supposedly the deer were most fond.

As well as Ration Books given to every person by the Government they issued free gas masks to everyone. The general public type was presented in a cardboard box with a linen tape

shoulder strap. They made about a 100 million of these, so, this is another indication of Government planning for war. My Mother made a cloth container for my gas mask with a much stronger shoulder strap to carry it to school. After the First World War use of gas to kill, blind and maim soldiers lungs, there was a great fear that we would be bombed with such chemical devices again.

An Air Raid Siren was installed on the top of a tall pole on the North east corner of the school grounds. This gave out very loud rising and falling moaning sounds for imminent air raids and a continuous whine for 'All Clear'. Our school cloakrooms were reinforced with heavy timber beams and posts and we were given Air Raid drills to congregate in there, whenever the siren sounded. All the windows were taped over in a criss-cross manner with masking tape to prevent the glass shattering and flying about. Heavy iron 'dining' tables, called Morrison shelters were available and subsidized for purchase, in order to hide under inside homes. Corrugated iron sections curved at the top to form a roof to make a shelter, were also offered for subsidized sale, these were buried wholly or partly in the ground, in any case to be covered with dirt. These were called Anderson shelters.

The general British public was, for the majority, unaware of the British Government's stealthy preparations for possible war with Germany; otherwise a lot more people and more important, many men of conscription age would have fled from the country. Even in 1935 and 1936, 3 to 4 years before the outbreak of war there was some planning by secret Government orders to war industry to start research and development of weapons of war. For example, in early 1935 The Government Ministry of Defence published a White Paper proposing the expansion and accelerated production of armaments for the Royal Navy, The Royal Air Force and the army, because of the major re-arming by Germany. Perhaps the most telling example of the British Government's intentions was the passing of The National Service Registration Act in 1937; this innocuous and harmless sounding title, allowed as far back as 1937, the mandatory registration and eventual conscription of all able bodied men between the ages of 18 and 38 to fight and die, when needed for the showdown the Government knew was coming with Germany. It has been said that Britain was not aware in the mid 1930s of the Nazi military build up but, personally, I do not believe this was true. Winston Churchill did not accept this premise. His connections with German Freemasons would help with knowledge of what was going on in Germany. The Government did not inform the general public of the war so imminent. Another

Government war harbinger was the passing of The Air Raid Precaution Act in 1937, in expectation of towns being bombed in Britain: again two year's before the war was declared. This act allowed for the forming of such organizations as the Air Raid Wardens and the lights-out policy for buildings and vehicles.

The Home Guard was also promulgated; this was a home military force that consisted of men too old to be conscripted into the military. These men were issued with army khaki coloured battle dress uniforms, which consisted of a short 'bomber' jacket and trousers and ankle length lace up black boots, plus a forage cap; unless one was an officer, then one was issued with a peaked cap.

Captain Meaker, Retired, from the First World War, was put in charge of West Dean Home Guard and he gave them drills in marching, handling guns and guerilla warfare in the surrounding fields and forests. Initially there were no guns issued, for lack of them and, they really did use hand made wooden replicas in the shape of guns, also shot guns if someone owned one and, yes, even pitchforks, for training. Eventually, however, they were issued with some old First World War Enfield rifles of .303 gauge and Captain Meaker received a .45 revolver pistol

The Royal Observer Corps (ROC) was another, very secretive, British Government planned organization, composed of specially selected persons from the general population. This organization was instigated well before the commencement of the war. They had a subdued brown colour uniform and their main duty was to simply watch the sky, ground and coasts for anything unusual or threatening, whether from their secret outposts or generally report on anyone and everything they thought relevant. What might be thought of as a 'Big Brother' network. Their reporting to a central command was via independent underground, for security, a telephone line system, not connected to the public telephone service and a non wireless system, therefore it was impervious to eavesdropping.

Air Raid Wardens on foot and bicycle patrolled neighborhoods, checking on people and houses and cars with inadequately shielded lights. The battle-cry of these individuals was: "Put that 'bloody' light out!" when light was emanating from windows, car and bicycle lights. They carried out remarkable, courageous and dangerous duties during the war, particularly in the cities during the air raids, putting out fires and rescuing people from bombed out buildings. They were a kind of sub layer war time police force and they were issued with a dark coloured uniform and a peaked hat and an ear piercing sound whistle to warn of danger. They were the officials who,

observed, recorded and reported about suspicious night activities. Sometimes they would be the first to observe a white parachute descending to ground at night, with a German airman suspended underneath, having ejected from a shot down aircraft; they then had the authority to arrest him.

However, the war did not really get going for Britain during the winter and spring of 1939 – 1940. We heard that the German army and air force, after they had vanquished Poland, they invaded and took over Norway and then in early May 1940 Belgium and Holland were easily defeated by Germany.