

The effects of war

Although Chinnor was a rural farming community, it will be shown that during World War II residents did undertake a number of other war related activities. It lay in what Winston Churchill referred to as the countryside as the '*Frontline of freedom*' and its residents suffered from wartime stress and its effect on health.

The extra stress and worry produced nationally by the war being particularly hard on women, has been eloquently detailed by Penny Summerfield and Gail Braydon. They had specifically explored the conditions for women doing war work and highlighted the physical and emotional strain of working in noisy factories for long hours, the effect of poor diet, in spite of rationing, and constant fear for the safety of loved ones. Factory regulations restricting the hours worked in factories were suspended for the duration of the war and women found themselves working a 12-hour day, 5^{1/2} days a week, as well as working night shifts for the first time.

This led to increased levels of fatigue and ultimately, complete exhaustion. This caused increased levels of absence due to sickness; the sickness rate was noted to be half as much again and, in common with men, the most common ailments reported being anaemia, nervous disorders, colds, headaches and gastritis.¹

These working days were made much longer by poor transport services and endless queuing for food, as well as sleep being interrupted by night bombing raids. Not only were working hours long, but compounded by excessive noise and smell. With no concept of health and safety, illness and accidents were common. This was all in addition to domestic and ARP fire watch duties.

Tuberculosis was on the increase, and accidents occurred due to fatigue and the blackout. Fatal road traffic accidents increased by 100% in 1939, with 1 in 5 people sustaining some form of injury. How effective the blackout was was debatable considering the illumination afforded by burning buildings. It was against this social background that advertisers of over-the-counter remedies promulgated their wares, promising to sooth nerves, regulate intestines, help sleep and restore vitality.²

Life could be just as hard on the land, with land girls working a 50 hour week in summer and 48 in winter, depending on the weather. In her autobiographical book '*One Pair of Feet*' Monica Dickens debated undertaking a wartime role in the Land Army but suggested that 'One saw oneself silhouetted against the skyline with a couple of plough horses but a second look showed one tugging up mangel-worzels from the frozen ground at five o' clock on a February morning'.³

A note in the Chinnor Women's Institute records on 8 October 1942, indicated that there was a discussion amongst the members about spare time war work and two members agreed to 'interview the manager of the factory and then call a public meeting.' However, which factory this referred to was not recorded. It could have been

¹ 'Health and Welfare' in Gail Braydon and Penny Summerfield, *Out of the Cage Women's Experiences in Two World Wars* (London, 1987), p. 219..

² Gardiner, *The Blitz*, p. 177.

³ Monica Dickens, *One Pair of Feet* (London, 1939), p. 8.

one of the furniture factories in either High Wycombe or Princes Risborough which might have continued to make utility furniture for the bombed areas, although some of these factories had been converted to making parts for aircraft. Cliff Heybourne recalls that a friend, Jim Clarke, worked in a furniture factory in Princes Risborough which had been requisitioned for making aeroplane parts and that this work was deemed to be a reserved occupation. This indicated that although Chinnor was a farming community, some residents were undertaking factory work with all its stresses and health implications.⁴

Mabel Howlett recalled that when she was pregnant with her daughter in 1941, she came back from holiday to find that Dr. Cooper had given in her notice at work on her behalf, as she had been very sick sewing covers for aeroplanes which contained rubber. Dr. Cooper said that 'Healthy babies were more important than the war effort.'⁵

Although Chinnor was not a specific target for bombing it did lie under the flight path of the bombers heading to Coventry and surrounding RAF airfields. RAF Benson was a bomber station and RAF Chalgrove, eleven and six miles away respectively, a matter of minutes flying time and were both bombed during 1941. Bombs did fall on the open countryside for a variety of reasons, for example to lighten the payload of a damaged aircraft.⁶

Dr Leverkus recalls that on a night call out to a farm she was alarmed to see that all the house lights were on in spite of the black out and German bombers overhead. When she mentioned this, the reply was that she was 'not to worry as there were no Air Raid Wardens in the area.' She also recalled 'how frightening it was to drive around the countryside in the blackout'.⁷ A map of enemy action in Oxfordshire shows four high explosive bombs falling on Kingston Blount in October 1940 and, in a separate action, one bomb falling on Aston Rowant in October 1940.⁸

No records of these incidents have been found in the local history literature nor in the local press for these two hamlets. However, a search of the local bomb incident records did record the incident and indicated that Chinnor was far from immune from enemy action. On 10 and 11 April 1941, six incendiary bombs were dropped in open countryside around Chinnor Hill resulting in one slightly injured bullock.

On 28 and 29 December two parachute mines were dropped on Towersey (between Chinnor and Thame). An air raid report of the November 25 1940, cites that the previous weekend saw the most serious raids on Witney, Goring and Chinnor. On the morning of 23 November 1940, a number of incendiary bombs were dropped and fell in fields surrounding Kingston Blount and Aston Rowant with no injuries. In the same incident a high explosive bomb was dropped on the allotments in Chinnor behind the

⁴ *W.I. minutes*, June 1941. Sadie Ward, *War in the Countryside, 1939-1945* (London, 1988), p. 69, Cliff Heybourne, aged 83 interviewed 1988.

⁵ Howlett, *Jottings*.

⁶ See for example, Duff Hart-Davis, *Our Land at War* (London, 2015) photograph of bombed farmhouse in open countryside between pp.298-299.

⁷ Leverkus, *Looking Back*, pp. 86, 78.

⁸ As depicted on a map of *Enemy Action Oxfordshire 1940-1945*, based on operational messages to County Control. With the kind permission of the Trustees of Thame Museum.

Black Boy Inn, and is referred to elsewhere in the thesis.⁹ Overall Chinnor received over 200 red alerts during the course of the war and Mabel Howlett remembered Bert Howlett riding around the village on a three-wheeler bike calling out the Home Guard and air raid wardens when the alert sounded.¹⁰

⁹*County Controller, Air Raid Damage Reports*, Ministry of Home Security, Oxford History Centre, Cowley, CC3/4/C4/37 & Air Raid Logbook CC3/4/A4/3.

¹⁰ *Register of Air Raid Warnings*, Oxford History Centre, Cowley, CC3/4/C4/38. Howlett, *Jottings*.