

[The following is a transcript of 6 pages of handwritten notes by the Revd. Frederick Saunders who was the Vicar of East Meon from 1941 to 1945.]

EAST MEON MEMOIR

In the summer of 1941 I was offered the post of Vicar and went to see the parish. The village had just suffered an air raid, the Germans having ringed it with flares and dropped incendiary and high explosive bombs into the circle. Rumour had it that Lord Haw-Haw (the Nazi broadcaster) had boasted that Southampton had been raided. No doubt this was a case where our air defences had misled the Germans by interfering with their radio guidance. There was one casualty - a pig. Inevitably, with the German air assault, there were dog-fights over the village and we planes shot down and aircrew floating down on their parachutes.

For the most part, the war left East Meon quietly alone. Farmers went on with their tasks. A field where the villagers had always found mushrooms was ploughed up and sown to kale. In the autumn, there was a prodigious crop of mushrooms. Washing baskets, buckets, and anything else that would hold them was filled, but Ernie Noyce, agent to the Bereleigh estate decided that too much damage was being done to the kale and the mushroom harvest was stopped.

The Vicarage played its part in the war effort. One family of evacuees, the Linterns from Battersea, occupied the west end of the house for the whole of the war. At the other end rooms were let to Naval families. There was always a demand for this kind of accommodation particularly as Leydene House was made the centre of the rapidly growing H.M.S Mercury. The Vicar enjoyed the hospitality of the Wardroom and his children shared in the lavish parties given to children in the village.

The peace of the village was interrupted as the war years passed. Prior to D-Day there were tanks and trucks parked everywhere and Anti-Aircraft defences were strengthened. We even had a battery for a time behind the Vicarage and the noise when they went into action was appalling. For two days tanks and armoured vehicles from the U.S. forces parked on the long drive up to the Vicarage. Our two daughters had a grand time with the friendly Americans - especially when they took them billy-cans of tea from the Vicarage kitchen.

I served as a warden in the ARP but had little to do other than to go out on a patrol when there as a warning.

Part of the D- Day preparation was that a fake camp was set up on the slopes of Butser Hill. The Germans duly dropped a number of 'butterfly bombs' on it. These were small anti-personnel bombs which floated to the ground in spread-out metal cases and wired there to be detonated by unwary feet. This attack was taken out of the hands of Colonel Swayne and his trusty A.R.P wardens and as the exact number of these devices was known from the number of canisters in which they dropped, a huge search was made in the copses and fields of that part of the parish, the area being sealed. A policeman visited the school to warn the children of the danger and that afternoon Mrs Hayes, the Headmistress, was shattered. The naughty boy of the village, who shall be nameless proudly announced that he had found one. Mercifully it turned out to be a tin can!

Just before D-Day I was standing in front of the Vicarage, on a fine morning, looking towards Portsmouth when I saw the A.A. guns fire at reconnaissance planes overhead. The shell bursts made it possible to trace the path of the planes although they themselves were too far off to be visible. Then I saw a burst of smoke and a long diagonal trail downwards. It was later said that this aeroplane had been shot down from 37,000 feet and had come down in Langstone Harbour.

About this time we began to have trouble with V1's or 'doodlebugs' as they were known. They were spectacular weapons flying low and making a noise like tin cans being rattles together. For the most part they travelled south of the village, being aimed at Portsmouth, Gosport, or Southampton. But some were much nearer. One Sunday evening we heard the familiar rattle out towards Old Winchester Hill. Then it stopped - the prelude to an explosion - and a great burst of smoke rose into the sky. There were no casualties.

More frightening still was a night when I was on patrol with another warden. From the east came the threatening din and then, at the critical moment, silence. Without hesitation we dived for the ditch but all we heard was a faint whistling as the V1 glided on its path towards West Meon. I fear that we were so pre-occupied with our escape that we gave too little thought to our neighbours along the valley. Mercifully it cleared that village too and exploded in open country.

On the whole, we in the country suffered little from real food shortage. After all we had rabbits, pigeons and even pheasants to augment the meat ration and our gardens gave us plenty of vegetables. The sugar ration was dispersed by Archie Hobbs in the village grocer's shop.

We at the Vicarage suffered a burglary. The larder was a locked shed let into the hill at the back of the Vicarage. One Monday morning we found it broken into and our milk, bacon and the remains of our Sunday joint was missing. Our village PC. went into action and traced the intruder through the dewy grass to the wood behind the house on the way to the down. He enquired of the Home Guard who kept watch and ward on the hill. They gave a description of a man seen leaving the Vicarage wood in the early morning and he was caught in Langrish later in the day - a deserter who was on the run.

The Home Guard was sometimes over-zealous in their watchfulness. One fine evening my wife and Mr. and Mrs. Coot, who at that time were living at the Vicarage, were out for a walk on the path to the lane going by the doctor's house at the corner. They were challenged peremptorily by a Corporal and a section of the Home Guard. 'Advance and be recognised!' This was a bit stupid because the walkers were all well-known! The Vicar expressed his own views forcibly when he met the Corporal next day in the High Street.

One other facet of the East Meon war effort was the formation of a platoon of the Army Cadet Force. As the only able-bodied man who seemed to be available I was enlisted as a Second Lieutenant. After taking Certificate A at Churcher's College, Petersfield, I was let loose with 12 or 14 of the bright lads of the village. Frank Collin's son Sydney, was Sergeant and we had Corporal Yates and Corporal Paice as N.C.O.s. I enjoyed myself hugely marching the lads up and down the High Street or taking them out on the downs to do map-reading and fieldcraft. The best entertainment, however, was .22 rifle shooting in the range we set up in the Marks' vineyard. We certainly shook up the rabbit population and some of the cadets became good marksmen.

Church life was, of course, the major part of my life. The dominant figures were Mr Reggie Nicholson, owner of Bereleigh and his wife Lady Margaret. In many ways the situation of East Meon, away from the major arteries of communication, had shielded it from the far-reaching changes already taking place in the life of the community and so, the Church.

Two events stand out in my mind. The first was seeing the famous font for the first time. At the outbreak of war it had been surrounded by sandbags. But as time wore on we came to know more about the effects of bombs and thought that if a bomb was close enough and powerful enough to destroy the thick walls of the church then the font would not escape. Further we feared that the

marble might be suffering damage from the sandbags. So one Lent (1943 I believe) a voluntary effort was made and the sandbags were removed in time for the Easter services. It was indeed a thrilling moment.

The second event had to do with the bells. For the first part of my ministry they were silent, kept for the purpose of warning against invasion. During this time I wanted to learn to ring. Luckily the ringing chamber at East Meon had no windows and so could be used at night without the bother of black-out. So the captain of the belfry instructed me on a 'tied' bell, that is a bell with a wooden clamp fixed to the clapper to keep it silent. There, in the tower, I learnt to handle a bell and I wondered what a stranger would have made of the creakings and groanings coming from the bearings, the wheel and the rope as these were audible down in the road. Then came the day when the ringing ban was lifted and I was able to join the other ringers in calling the faithful to worship and in ringing in the New Year. The custom for this was that we rang in rounds and then 'fired' the bells, ringing them all at once. After the ring we retired to Archie Hobbs' house there to salute New Year as appropriately as we could in wartime.

The Church organ at East Meon was a modest affair but we were blessed in having in Mt Lodge from West Meon a very devoted organist. We had a choir too with a number of boys and a few men. Another devoted member of the team was Frank Collins.

I was instituted by Bishop Partridge who when I was reciting the customary oath of loyalty barked at me, 'Don't stand with your back to the bishop!'. I had thought it right to face the assembled congregation. In spite of the inauspicious start, there is much that I still treasure of my 3 ½ years as Vicar of East Meon.