

Sherfield Memories - WWII



The Youthful Memories of
Donald & Ursula Rickwood

Sherfield-on-Loddon School



1939. Pupils aged 8-14. Donald Rickwood - second from left in the first row,
Ursula Cork - fourth from left in the fourth row.

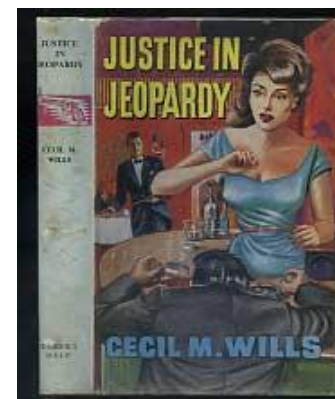
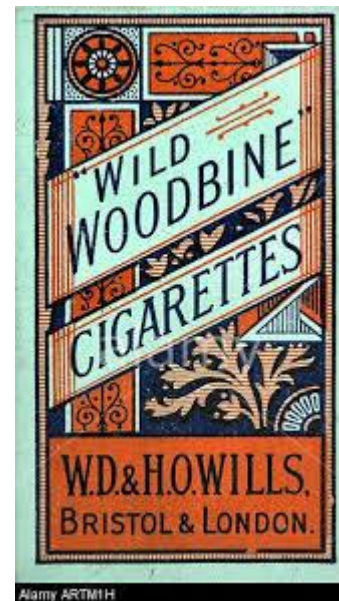
Court Farm

In 1929, Major General Maitland Cecil Melville Wills, MC, JP, (a director of the Wills Tobacco Company and a writer of detective stories), bought Sherfield Court Estate from Lady Dorothy Violet Wellesley and Bowling's Farm from Julia Palmer.

The Farm Bailiff, Arthur Rickwood, and his wife Catherine, moved to Bowling's Farm House/Court Farm House, from an estate near Bristol owned by Major Wills. They lived there until 1947.

Their two sons were born in the house, Donald born in 1931, and Alistair in 1933. Donald and Ursula Cork married in 1951. Alistair and Edna Dawn Smith married in 1957. Both Ursula and Edna hailed from Sherfield.

Until the mid-1980s, Donald and Ursula lived in and near the village. They now live in Auckland, New Zealand. Alistair lived in Sherfield until 2020.



Other Families



- Other families on the estate living nearby during the war included:
- Ted and Phyllis Onions (at times O'nions) and their daughter Margaret – at Lilac Cottage (*now Little Bowlings*). Ted was the cowman. Phyllis was the daughter of Ernest Williams, the licensee of the Four Horseshoes.
- Orlando Charles and Sarah Lloyd and their son Bill, of Bowlings Cottage (*now Bowlings*) who came to Sherfield with Major Wills. 'Chas' was the electrician cum handyman on the estate.



Bowling's Farm/ Court Fa

The Wartime Estate



- Soon after the start of the war Sherfield Court was requisitioned for the War Effort. Major Wills and family had to move out, to make way for a shipping firm from London and its staff. They never returned to Sherfield Court.
- Major Wills was involved with the War Office. The estate was run by the Estate Manager, Colonel Scorer, who set up an office in the sitting room of Court Farm House.
 - In December 1945 the estate was sold to Louis Dreyfus, a music publisher from New York.
 - In 1948 it was sold again to Sir Roger Mellor Makins, who became Lord Sherfield in 1964.



Camouflage



“When the war came, Court Farm House had to be camouflaged green and brown. So too Lilac Cottage.”

“The glasshouse roof reflected on moonlit nights. So, we opened up a lot of hessian sacks and stitched them in to a large sheet to cover the roof. Attached a pole to the sheet and fixed it to the top of the roof, at the bottom another pole with a rope on each end.”



“Ropes on each corner went up through the bedroom windows. During the day with much shouting “are you READY” one in each bedroom would pull the sheet up to let the sunlight in, on to the grapes, and lower it again at night.”

Bombers by the Hundred



1938/9 - “As I stood on the well cover and looking towards the village, I heard a different engine noise coming up over the Butchers shop. It was from an auto-gyro and it flew right over head.”

“That was the first time I had seen anything like it, not knowing that in a year or two we would see hundreds of bombers going over head around four to six in the afternoon on their way to Germany.”

“You will never see that many planes flying in formation again. They had left their bases in East Anglia, to fly down over the South Coast, around over France and up into Germany, drop their bombs and fly straight back to base in Lincolnshire or Suffolk.”



V for Victory



“I remember in 1940 making a large white chalk V for victory in the blocked-in window of the engine shed.”

This can be seen in the photograph of Donald and his dog, with his friend Maurice Syckelmoore, from Turgis Green.

The engine shed has hardly changed in 75 years. But now the V is for Victory over Covid-19.



A Busy Road



- “I could stand on the cover of the well and look down into the village and see what was going along the main road.”
- “There were long convoys of tanks, trucks, half-track gun carriers, tank carriers, and air craft carriers, long artic trailers with the body of the aircraft on and the wings placed one on each side, also lots of American convoys with American type trucks and all the things they needed.”
- “As Ursula lived so close to the road, one of her memories is of the convoys coming back from Dunkirk, then later, troops and trucks making their way to D Day, and listening to them at night.”
- “It was a very busy road, and narrow, given all that traffic that had passed over it.”

Troops on the Move



“I can remember one night we were looking out the window down on to the main road watching all the troops marching along the road to Reading and as they were passing by Pond Cottage some one shouted out “put that light out”.

“We heard later that someone was coming out the door and showed the light but I can’t remember what was going on in the house.”

“They told us they were all the troops from Dunkirk. It went on for a few days.”

The same happened with them all marching through the village on their way south to the D Day landings.“

Air Raid Shelters



“If you lived on a farm you could not get an Air Raid Shelter. So, our shelter was in a drainage ditch, near the generator shed. It was dug deeper and wider than the usual drainage ditches, and one end was blocked up. The dirt was piled up on some old iron railings and sheets of corrugated. Inside a bench seat of wood each side.”

“It was for the four of us and Ted, Phyl and Margaret Onions. It was a bit cosy inside (small). My Father and Ted spent most of the time outside as they were air raid wardens.”

Air Raid Wardens had a red bucket of sand with ‘FIRE’ written on it, a bucket of water and a stirrup pump; ours stood by the back door.” (Also, steel helmet, a gas rattle, ceiling pike for testing bomb damaged buildings, first aid kit and gas mask). They alerted householders to chinks of light from windows which should have been blacked-out.



Air Raids



“We didn’t use the shelter very often. It was more to shelter from falling shrapnel or if they did bring one down with a full load of bombs on board.”

“One night I remember well was when they bombed Coventry (1940). German bombers were going over very high up and all the search lights were scanning the sky. If they locked on to one, every gun around Bramley Camp would open up.”



“From the front bedroom window (Court Farm House) at night we could look out over the monument (War Memorial) and see a red glow. It would get higher and wider: that was the fires from the air raids in London starting up.”

The Tank Carrier



One day when we were in school a large tank carrier with a Churchill tank was pulled up on the gravel in front of the White Hart with other army trucks and soldiers.

At play time some of us got as close as we could for a look, (we were not supposed to cross the Bramley Road). We found out that they were doing something to the tyre on the tank carrier and it either burst or the ring blew off as they were blowing it up.

The soldier that was doing it was blown up against the White Hart wall and I think he was killed or, if not, badly injured, in the blast.

I went later to look. There was a gouge in the gravel and marks in the wall where the gravel had hit into the White Hart wall.

Two Barrage Balloons



On Sunday nights the family used to go for a walk, Wildmoor, Turgis, Hartley Wespall, Lilly Mill Lane, Folly Lane and along to Herbie Willis the blacksmith, for an hour or so. This Sunday night we had gone up Goddards Lane to the path to the Church.

We were speaking to Jim and Doris Ponting, at Rose Cottage next to the chapel when looking down over Court Farm to Hartley Wespall was a barrage balloon going along towards Turgis with a long cable trailing behind and not very high up.

As it got past Sycklemoore's farm it went up in flames and crashed down. The cable had crossed over the electric pylons and the barrage balloon had caught fire,(that is the old electric pylons, not the new ones that are a lot higher).

Looking from the back door and over the copse to Church End was another balloon just above the trees. The soldiers at the Pioneer Camp had managed to hold it down and it was full size and it was pointing up a bit. As it was deflating slowly, the end was moving in and out like a huge mouth. When we got home from school in the afternoon it had gone.

Guns

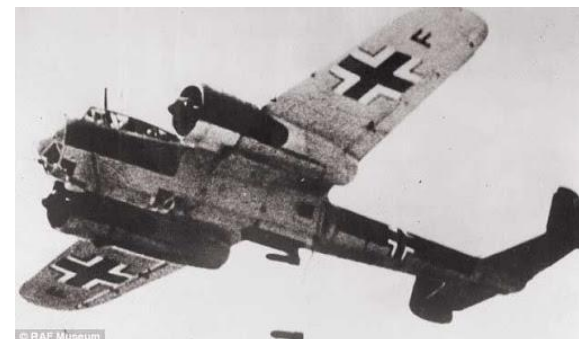


“The Gun Site behind Court Farm was up a track about 100 metres up from the front of the old cottage at Goddards Farm. It covered about an acre.”

“There were two long brick huts, end way on to the track for the soldiers that manned the gun.”

“The gun (3” Bofors) was to the left of the huts facing towards Court Farm in a line with the copse, and it always fired away from the ammunition sheds in Bramley Camp.”

“There were 55 sheds and if they did go up, then we had a suitcase packed by the front door ready to evacuate.”



The Battle of Britain



“When the air raid siren in Bramley Camp went off and we were in school we had to go into the air raid shelters that were built between the school house and the Bramley Road.”

“I can remember the Battle of Britain (1940) going on and watching the planes in the sky.”

“We were supposed to take cover if we were out in the open, but we were in no danger unless you could see a plane crashing or a bomb coming out.”

The Horse Pond



“It was in the middle of winter and freezing cold and the Horse Pond had frozen over. We used to get back over the other side of the road and run and slide across the pond.

One very frosty and dark night this truck came through the village and turned left out on to the pond went a little way in and fell through the ice.

In those days the water came right up to the road and with every thing covered in snow he mistook it for the road. Some said he was looking for the turn at Church End to go to the search light.

That spoilt our slide. As it froze over it left big slabs of ice sticking up. The winters seemed a lot colder then as most winters in the 40s the pond froze over, sometimes not as far as the wall and, of course, all the other bits of ponds.”

Unexpected Visitors



“One dark night in 1942 or 1943, we heard a motor bike come up in the yard and turn round and go out before Father could find out what was going on.”

“An hour later the bike came back and went up past the granary around the building and out into the field in front of Lilac Cottage followed by a convoy of 50/60 large army trucks. You could just see their shapes.”

“Army trucks had a white spot painted on the centre of the back axle and the covers of their head lights shone down low so they could see the white spot on the truck in front which they could follow without much light showing.”

“They parked up along the hedge to the copse and along the top of the field.”

“By the morning they had set up a field kitchen on the grass in front of the granary. They said we could join them for breakfast, which we did.”

“When we got home from school they had gone. We were given a hoe and had to pull the dirt back into the wheel tracks up along the hedge.”

Bombs



“One night I remember as if it was yesterday, was when the People’s Pantry in Reading was bombed (10th February 1943).”

“I was washing up all the bottles, milk cooler and the other things when I heard the bombs going off in that direction.”

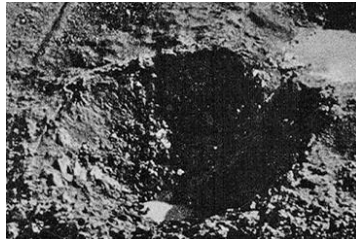
“Then the air raid siren in Bramley Camp went off and I could hear shouting out the back. That was the soldiers getting the gun ready up at Goddard’s Farm.”

“The bombs were not a worry unless you got a direct hit. It was the shrapnel from the shells falling from that gun up the back that made you take cover. At odd times we would hear a bit of shrapnel fall on the metal barn roof in the night and we would look for it in the morning.”

Sherfield – Bombed!



“Six stick bombs intended for Chamberlain’s House in Heckfield fell in Sherfield and Hartley. The first fell in the ditch beside Mr Miles the game keeper’s dog kennels, next to his house in Wildmoor Lane (Keeper’s Cottage). It plastered mud up the kennel wall. The blast went backwards and blew all the small trees over and all the leaves off for a way back.”



“The next fell in some woodland that started from the Mill and followed the river to what was called the Roundabouts, behind a fisherman’s hut that used to stand there. In the mid-70s you could see where it fell - a slight hollow with a tree in it and some scars on some of the trees around.”

“Those who went to have a look at the crater were told by the village policeman that it was best if they went home. I think everyone in the village went to have a look but I cannot remember which year it was.”



Bramley Camp

“The Germans knew about Bramley Camp (an ammunition depot) and that it had a river in it, but not the exact location.”

“Through the camp, Bow Brook was covered with camouflage nets and in the fields to Bow Bridge the river was left to grow over with trees and rushes so that it did not show up at night. All the sheds were covered in camouflage green and brown paint. From the fields behind Court Farm it was a job to pick them out.”

“The Moors (the area between the Loddon and the Lyde) was cleared by the War Agricultural Executive Committee. This was to help the war effort by making more land productive and, because of the rivers, the Germans would think that was Bramley Camp.”

This decoy must have been successful as many incendiary bombs were dropped on the Moors but not on the Camp.

“After the war they could be found if you knew what you were looking for. The fin would be all rusted away showing as a rusty mark when you turned over the soil. The incendiary part looked like half a baked bean tin and was like a piece of aluminium; on a good one you might be able to see screw marks where the fin was attached, or little holes on the end that had the primer in.”



Beware of Bombs and Builders!

“Years later, all that area between the two rivers was in grass. It was a bit like the fen land in Lincolnshire, a bit peaty and at the far end from the farm if you jumped up and down, or dropped something heavy, the ground would shake.”

“I ploughed it and planted some with oats for cattle feed and some with a better type of grass. I ploughed up many incendiary ends.”

“One cold winter’s day when I was ploughing the moors I picked up one or two.”

“Coming up off the moors at lunch time I found Dan Musson, the builder, and his men who were working on Wildmoor farmhouse, all sitting round a fire in an oil drum. I had this corroded piece of aluminium in my hand and I said “*do you know what that is*” and they passed it round. No one knew what it was part of.”

“Just as I was saying “*it’s an incendiary bomb*”, the last man threw it in the oil drum! It gave a little hiss and a weak blue flame came up, nothing dangerous.”

A Near Miss?



“In the summer of 1944 the Boy Scouts went camping but not far: up Breach Lane and down to the Roundabouts and set up camp by the river in front of the Fisherman’s hut.”

“We could hear the band in the Village Hall quite clearly: Harold Lailey from the Mill - drums, Li Dodd from the garage – accordion, and Mr Therien who lived next to the Methodist Chapel - a wind instrument. Every third tune they would play Paper Moon.”

“Around midnight we all got out of our tents to see this flame travelling across the sky, going from right to left in the direction of London. We were told later it was a Flying Bomb.”



“We did not get much sleep as around three-o-clock, five or six of Bowden’s shire horse’s (from Lance Levy Farm) went by with their heavy hoofs clumping and snorting at the tents.”

Prisoners of War



Towards the end of the war Taylors Lane Pioneer Camp at Church End housed Italian prisoners of war. They wore a dark brown army uniform and were put to work on the local farms.

On Saturday mornings Ursula was told to stay in the garden and not play out on the common, since the POW s could come into the village to the shop and post office and as time went by they were free to come into the village at any time.

I remember seeing about ten men pulling mangolds and two soldiers holding rifles in Frank Lee's field that went from the copse to the old main road.

Later on when they went out to a farm there no one was guarding them.

Dances



- “There were three dances a week in the Village Hall, for the troops.”
- “They came from Bramley Camp, Taylor’s Lane and Heckfield, where there was a very large camp in the woods.”
- “Americans came from Aldermaston air base. They parked up their Studebaker and International trucks around and by the back garage. If Annie Bright, who owned The Globe, had some beer, they would sit on the bank outside, drink it and then give us the bottles to return and get the money back.”



Gliders



- “The Americans flew Dakotas that pulled gliders. At times they would practice over Sherfield.”
- “Once we saw one pulling two gliders at once. It came very close to a tall elm tree at the top of Winton Cottage garden.”
- “The gliders were very big and they made the Dakotas work hard at times.”
- “From the Common (Village Green) we used to see them circling over Aldermaston way.”

Got any Gum, Chum?



- “The Butcher’s shop (*now The Shop*) was owned by Mrs Rutter who sat in the little office in the back corner of the shop. When you got your meat you paid through the office window.”
- “In the office with her was Eleanor Friend. She was around eighteen and lived across the road next to the War Memorial.”
- “If Ursula and her friends who lived around that corner, saw an American convoy coming they would dash into the shop and say “*Eleanor, there is a convoy coming*”. They would get her outside the shop to be sure to getting some gum. “
- “They used her as the attraction: no need to call out “*Got any gum chum*”. The Americans were very generous throwing out sweets and gum.”



The Home Guard



- “There was a Home Guard in Sherfield.”
- “Across the road from the now tennis courts they put up two or three things that looked like swings, and from each cross bar was hanging a large sack filled with straw which they used for bayonet practice.”
- “Sometimes we would watch them doing a drill and there were a few things they had to jump over.”



Gunpowder!



“Some time during the war we were asked to collect conkers.”

“It was no good going along the Bramley Road, as all the other children went there. So, myself, Roy Bulpit, who lived on the right of the chapel, and Eric Percy, who lived in Winton Cottage, went into the wood beside the old main road that started to the right of the lodge entrance to what is now the school, and filled a trough with conkers, (I think it was on some old pram wheels).”



“The collection point was by the school air raid shelters (and for all that effort we got all of a Half Penny a hundredweight).”

“The conkers were made into acetone and cordite to make gunpowder, or so they told us. What happened to the old trough after that I have no idea.”

Potatoes



- “We could take time off from school to go potato picking for Billie Bulpitt at Floods Farm, Budd at Hartley Wespall, Gamble next to Hartley Mill, and Bowden at Lance Levy Farm.”
- “Mr Gamble would pick us up outside the White Hart, with an old black car. The girls went in the car and, usually, just the boys in the covered trailer behind.”
- “The trailer was used to take calves and pigs to market. As it was covered with a tarpaulin you had to sit on the floor: so you had to pick a spot that the pigs had missed.”



A Young Potato Picker



- 1941: “I had just finished a day for Mr Garret at Moulshay Farm, and had walked over the fields from Church End to a gate near where there are now houses at the Plantation.”
- “On my right leg is my lunch box, and the light coloured box on top of that is for the gas mask which went everywhere with you.”



A Concert



Children's Concert, which raised £6 for the Prisoners of War Fund (after paying expenses), was held at the Village Hall on Tuesday evening in last week. It was organised by Mrs. Scott, who had spent much time in training and rehearsing the children. Miss Cassell kindly took charge of the country dancing, and the performance of her young pupils testified to their trainer's ability. Mr. Scott was the composer of four items - "The introduction piece"; song, "Run, Rommel, Run"; a dialogue and a recitation. Mrs. M. P. Barker presided, and the varied programme included songs by the company, and solos, dialogues and recitations, sketches, country dances, etc., ending with the children singing the hymn "Now the day is over" and "God save the King." The children taking part were Ursula Cork, Edna Smith, Beryl Smith, Pat Holdaway, Cynthia Holdaway, Mary Hews, Mary Koster, Sylvia Percy, Margaret Jenkins, Grace Scott, Roy Bulpit and John Scott, all of whom performed very well indeed. Mr. Scott and Mr. Bushnell were door stewards and also helped considerably by selling tickets before the show.

"A Children's Concert, which raised £6 for the Prisoners of War Fund (after paying expenses) was held in the Village Hall on Tuesday evening of last week. It was organised by Mrs. Scott, who had spent much time training and rehearsing the children. Miss Cassell kindly took charge of the country dancing, and the performance of her young pupils testified to their trainer's ability. Mr. Scott was the composer of four items - "*The introduction piece*"; a song, "*Run, Rommel, Run*"; a dialogue and a recitation. Mrs. M. P. Barker presided, and the varied programme included songs by the company, and solos, dialogues and recitations, sketches, country dances, etc., ending with the children singing the hymn "*Now the day is over*", and "*God save the King.*" The children taking part were Ursula Cork, Edna Smith, Beryl Smith, Pat Holdaway, Cynthia Holdaway, Mary Mews, Mary Koster, Sylvia Percy, Margaret Jenkins, Grace Scott, Roy Bulpit and John Scott, all of whom performed very well indeed. Mr. Scott and Mr. Bushnell were door stewards and also helped considerably by selling tickets before the show."

The Organisers



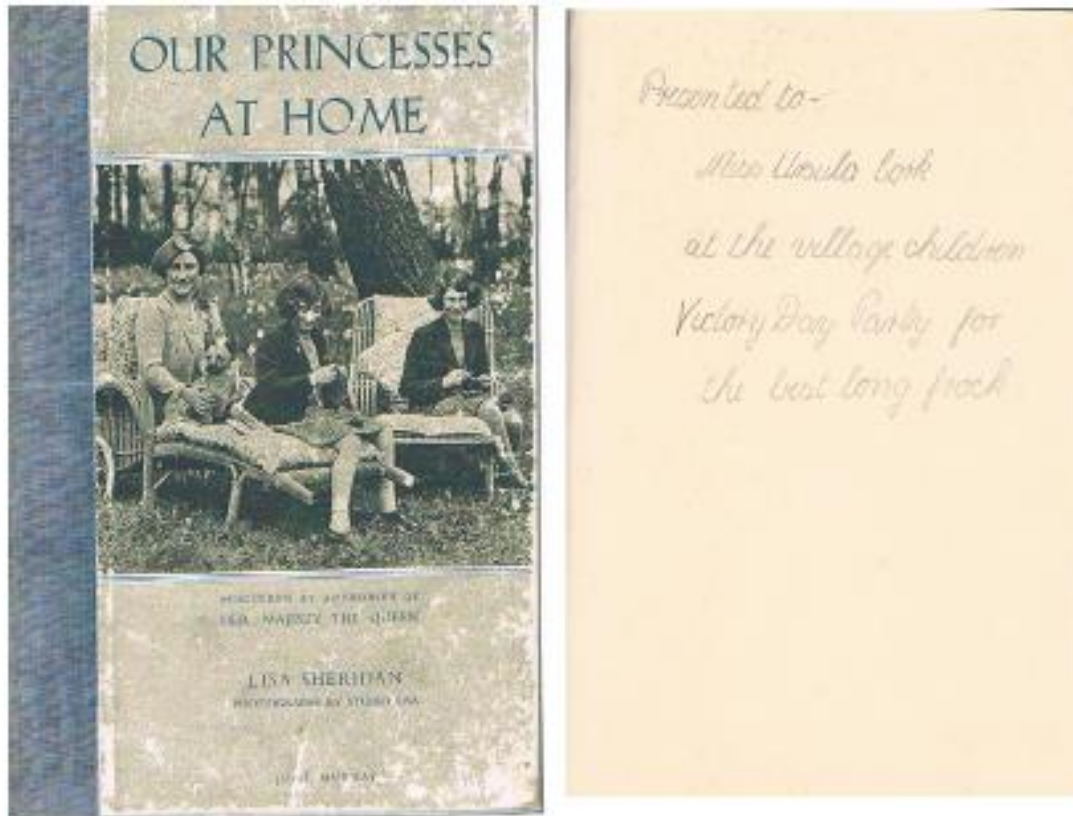
- “Mr & Mrs Scott and their children, lived next door to Ursula at 2 South View Cottages, the row of cottages attached to the Butcher’s shop which is now The Shop.”
- “Miss Cassell was an evacuee teacher from Portsmouth. Miss Abbot was the other teacher who arrived with all the evacuee children that came to live in Sherfield. Both stayed with Ted and Phyl Onions at Lilac Cottage and had the front room as their sitting room.”
- “Mr Bushnell was the shoe mender. I think he lived in a house just before Goring’s Garage on the Reading Road and later moved to Well House next to the Village Hall. He may have had a little wooden shed just inside the gate where he worked.”

The Entertainers



- Ursula Cork (*Rickwood*) -1 South View Cottages; Edna (*Dawn*) Smith (*Rickwood*) and Beryl Smith (*Jackson*) – Gravel Mead, near Winton Cottage. Grace Scott and John Scott – 2 South View Cottages.
- Pat Holdaway (*Wills*) and Cynthia Holdaway (*Turvey*) - what is now Greenway, as you turned into the path into the allotments. Mary Hews - at the entrance of Redlands Drive.
- Mary Koster and Margaret Jenkins may have been evacuees or they came to live with relatives during the war.
- Sylvia Percy (*Bicknell*) - Winton Cottage. Her brother Eric Percy was my mate. They were cousins to Edna and Beryl Smith.
- Roy Bulpit lived on the right of the Chapel next to the farm and was also a mate in our school days.
- *Italics indicate married name*

Party Time



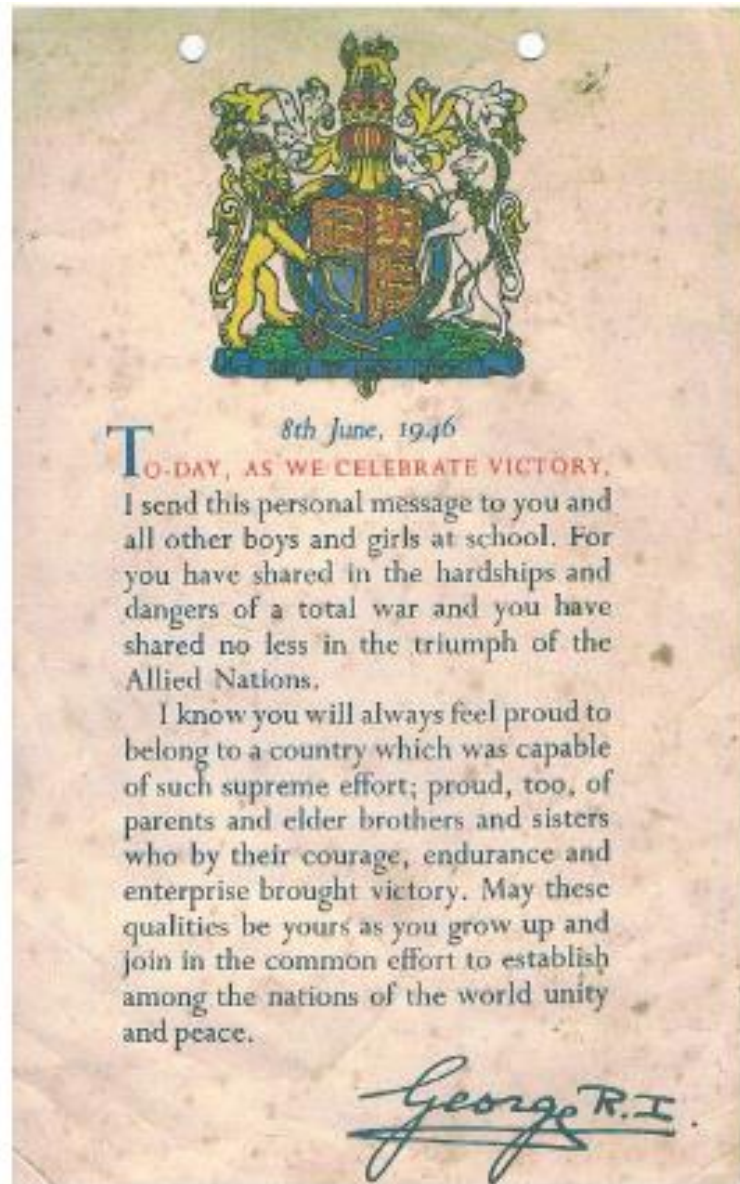
This book was presented to Ursula Cork for the best long frock, at the Village Children's Victory Day Party. The light green frock was borrowed from Mrs Wright.

"Mrs Wright had a box full of dressing-up clothes that were used for the plays she organised, to raise funds for the Red Cross, and entertaining wounded soldiers at Sanguilo House (Drayton Manor, Wildmoor Lane), Park Prewett Hospital, the Village Hall and on the lawn at the Mill."

"Mr Wright was the scout master. The Wrights lived between the school playground and the football field."

"Mrs Barraclough of Bramley Road, also organised events in support of the Red Cross."

Victory Celebrated



All school children received this message from the King.

Don & Ursula Rickwood 2020

