

Alec Turner's Wartime Life in Loxley

As a 10 year old World War II evacuee I arrived at Loxley as one of a party of about thirty school children accompanied by two teachers one evening in June 1940. We had travelled by train from Halesworth in Suffolk to Stratford upon Avon and then on by coach to the school in Loxley. At the start of war in September 1939 our school had been evacuated from Dagenham Essex, to spend those first nine months in Suffolk, but as Holland, Belgium and France became over-run and occupied by German troops, the prospect of an invasion of our shores became a realistic threat. The coast of East Anglia was considered to be a highly vulnerable area for attack, hence the reason for our arrival in Loxley.

At Loxley School that evening many Loxley residents had gathered for our arrival and to accept the children into their homes. The principle village organisers were the head-teacher, Miss Rose, and from Loxley Hall, Mrs. Gregory-Hood who was the Wartime Billeting Officer for Loxley. In the main brothers or sisters were billeted together but this could not be achieved in every situation. I was on my own and seemed to be last to be selected and taken to my new home in the cottage adjoining the Fox Inn. For the next two years or so I lived in Fox Cottage with Mr. and Mrs. Jordan who were in their sixties, and their unmarried daughter Dorothy who bore most of the responsibility of looking after me.

Two teachers from Dagenham, Mr. Forester and a lady teacher of French Canadian origin (I now can't remember her name) had accompanied our school party and were billeted in Woodley's farm which was on the hill just above the village. The local farms were referred to by the farmer's names in those times but no doubt now are known differently. These two teachers organised school lessons for all the evacuee children in a wooden community hut that existed in the village. This situation only lasted for a few weeks as Mr. Forester was called into the Army. By then several evacuee children had returned to their own homes, which made sufficient but cramped accommodation viable within Loxley School. There were two classrooms in the school. A small room accommodated the local infant children and the larger room for the junior age group. No bus services existed from Loxley and on reaching eleven years of age the children living in the village were loaned bicycles from Warwickshire County Council for them to cycle to the larger school in the neighbouring village of Wellesbourne.

The smaller classroom held the infant children and their teacher. In the larger classroom half held the local junior aged children taught by Miss Rose, and in the other half were the evacuee children with their teacher who did not stay very long before being replaced by another teacher from Dagenham known as Miss Boudwell. As you would imagine this teaching situation was far from ideal with two classes, and children having a wide range of ages being taught in the same classroom. How those teachers coped with that situation

still amazes me, but this was wartime and disruption and inconveniences placed upon many peoples at work and in the home had to be tolerated. The school continued with this situation for nearly a year from September 1940, until the summer of 1941. During that time several more evacuee children drifted home leaving most of remaining ones, aged eleven or over. I remember a couple of school outings to Stratford upon Avon organised by Miss Rose. One to the cinema to see Walt Disney's film "Pinocchio", and to the Memorial Theatre, and secondly to see the Christmas Pantomime, Cinderella.

During the summer of 1941 the evacuee children were issued with brand new Hercules bicycles and from then onwards went to school at Wellesbourne. Miss Boudwell returned back to Dagenham. I've no doubt that Miss Rose must have heaved a great sigh of relief not to have to share her classroom anymore. She was a strong disciplinarian with voice to match, and imparted her views and morals to all pupils in her school in a most vigorous manner. I am sure she will have made her mark in the teaching history of Loxley School.

At Wellesbourne School the dozen or so children from Dagenham were integrated into classes relative to their age groups. All children age eleven and above from Loxley now cycled the three miles to Wellesbourne School. It meant going through the wartime built bomber aerodrome. School children were given special permission to use the original road from Loxley to Wellesbourne, which had been closed for civilian traffic when construction of the airfield started in late 1940. The alternative route along the road to Walton would have added considerable distance to our daily school journey. There was a guarded barrier with hut just before the road junction to Hampton Lucy. The RAF guards came to recognise the children that cycled to school and also allowed us to go through at other times, which was useful when urgent errands were required for Loxley residents.

Having to cycle through the aerodrome to and from school was always of interest as you would often see at fairly close quarters the daytime training exercises of Wellington Bombers taking off and landing, and the ground crews engaged in the servicing and arming of aircraft on their dispersal points. All exciting stuff for an eleven year old boy of that time.

I enjoyed my school days at Wellesbourne and to have a bicycle that I could use as my own. My class teacher for most subjects was Miss Martin. The Headmaster (I'm not sure of his name now but seem to think it was Mr. Brown) selected a few boys for his lessons mainly of a scientific nature, which he always made very interesting. He had a special interest in meteorology and taught us about the many different cloud formations and their uses in weather prediction.

On the opposite side of the road there was a school garden where vegetables were grown to help the war effort. There were periods in our school week when the boys were given jobs to tend and weed the vegetable beds. There was a plum tree in the garden that bore some tasty looking fruit. After

allocating our tasks the teacher would disappear back into the school and with the windows being high up we all thought we couldn't be seen from anywhere in the school. The temptation was overwhelming and about six of us raided the plum tree and eat some of the deliciously ripe Victoria plums. After the period in the garden was over, the secretly observed guilty six were named and called into the headmaster's office where we all received the cane as punishment for our misdemeanour! We never discovered how we were seen and named.

In August and September 1940 the Battle of Britain raged. Most of the aerial attacks were confined to the southern part of the country and I don't remember any incidents at that time around Loxley. The daily radio news programmes and newspapers kept us informed of the air battles, playing great emphasis on the Luftwaffe losses to help boost the country's morale. Newspapers came somewhat late in the day to Loxley and I remember looking each afternoon at the paper that Fred Howkins had delivered. Fred allowed me to read his paper, which I used to spread out on his front lawn to read before he arrived home from work. He lived alone in the cottage immediately opposite and was invited each week to Sunday dinner by the Jordans. Sadly he was killed later in the war when in the Navy and his ship was torpedoed and sunk on a convoy to Russia. His name now appears on the War Memorial in Loxley.

Preparations began to meet the invasion threat. A warning system was brought in by the government that church bells were only to be rung in the advent of a landing by parachutist troops. Most road signposts were removed and country people were encouraged to be suspicious of strangers especially if they pronounced words containing W's as V's. The Local Defence Volunteers or LDV force were formed, but were later renamed the Home Guard when all fit men became drafted into war related activities in addition to their daily working jobs. A small Loxley Troop was formed, under the command of retired army Major Gregory Hood of Loxley Hall which trained in the evenings and at week-ends. At times they would march through the village and on Sunday mornings and have rifle firing practice at a firing range situated in a field towards Goldicote. Road barriers were constructed that could easily be placed across a road if the need arose. They consisted of a large horizontal tree trunk with a barbed wire fence built along its length. It was pivoted at one end and a cartwheel fixed at the other end. In the event of an enemy landing the barrier could be easily swung out across the road and the wheel quickly removed to lock it in position. There was one such barrier built at the bottom of the hill just about ten yards from the junction along the road to Stratford. The ground rose steeply on one side of the road and there was a very substantial stone wall on the other side of the road. It would have stopped a wheeled vehicle but would have been no match for a tank. I am sure it was the subject of much humorous and derisory talk in the bars of the Fox Inn. Mr and Mrs. Buckingham were the publicans at the Fox Inn, serving Flowers Ales from the Stratford upon Avon Brewery. Mr.

Buckingham died during 1942. After that his son Jack, with his mother, continued running the establishment.

Food rationing began soon after the start of war and the full effects began to bite during 1940. The two village shops supplied most of Loxley inhabitants with the rationed foods. The two Goode sisters ran one store and Mr. and Mrs. Jarvis ran the other business which also served as the Post Office. The one thing that Loxley had was a plentiful supply of vegetables. Most cottages had fairly large gardens where a predominance of vegetables and fruit were grown. In addition there was an allotment area where many villagers had plots and grew extra vegetables.

Mr Ward who lived at the top of the hill had several plots and specialised in growing asparagus, which was regarded in those times as an expensive and luxurious vegetable, and only available when in season for a few weeks during the summer. I believe most of his crop was sold to hotels, but he used to sell some cheaply within the village. I learned to love the unique taste of this vegetable, which can only be had when it is cooked from being freshly cut. The foreign produced supplies obtained in the supermarkets of today never achieve that same flavour for me.

At times I helped on the local farms to supplement my small amount of pocket money that my parents sent. Mr. Whitehead's farm was at the bottom of the hill and I with other boys from the village would help at haymaking, harvest and corn thrashing times. Together with David Howkins I remember riding on the seed drilling machine being towed by the tractor when the wheat was being sown. Mr. Whitehead thought that the added weight gave extra stability to the sowing depth. David Howkins was about the same age as myself and we became good friends. He lived midway up the hill with his parents and younger brother Donald. We used to spend many hours roaming the fields and woods around the village. We climbed trees, went bird nesting, and hopefully kept free of most mischief. One afternoon David and I were returning from the woods along the Walton Road. Beside the road was a muddy pond that provided water for cattle. There we found a cow stuck up to its head in the water and obviously in danger of drowning. A fence divided the pond so that it provided access to the water from two fields. A Czechoslovakian soldier who spoke no English had climbed along the fence and very precariously was attempting to keep the animal's head above water. We indicated to him that we would go for help, and ran as fast as we could to the nearest farm (Godwins). Mr Godwin rescued the cow using his tractor and a thick rope. Several days later I saw the same soldier sitting in Loxley Churchyard, painting a picture of the church. At that time there was a detachment of Czechoslovak soldiers based at Walton Hall.

David's father kept two pigs in a sty in the garden and one Saturday morning when snow was thick on the ground David and I walked to Hampton Lucy with a note requesting the butcher to come and kill the pigs. The following Saturday with the snow still around, he arrived, and with other adult help,

carried out the gruesome task of slitting their throats, singeing the hair off on a bed of burning straw, and finally cutting the carcasses up into joints of pork, and joints that would be cured for ham and bacon. David and I watched the whole operation, which has since given me a first hand understanding of what happens to the animals we eat for our daily existence.

Whilst at Loxley I joined the Wolf Cubs. Mrs. Gregory Hood was Brown Owl for the Cubs and Brownie Packs when we attended the Saturday morning sessions in an old stable building within Loxley Hall. We also went into the main house where she used to read us chapters from Rudyard Kipling's "Jungle Book" in a beautifully furnished upstairs drawing room. Mrs. Gregory Hood was very elegant lady of about sixty years of age who took a genuine interest in all the residents and children within the village. She always displayed a sincere greeting with an enlightened smile to everyone whenever she came through the village.

One Sunday afternoon the Wolf Cubs and Brownies went to Stratford and attended a Parade for the Deputy Chief Scout, Lord Summers. (Baden Powell was Chief Scout at that time). As many of the Cubs in the Loxley pack were of Scouts age, he suggested to Mrs. Gregory Hood that a Scout Troop should be formed and that a Scout Leader from Stratford be appointed. Within a week or so this all happened and a young Scout Leader cycled to Loxley every Friday evening for our meetings held in the Community Hut. We learned many aspects of scouting, which have since been most useful. Tying different types of knots, points of the compass, morse code, lighting fires and simple cooking.

So far most of my writings have been about the ordinary aspects of living in Loxley during the early war years when I was there, and have said little about the more sinister side of war activity that occurred. The first of those I remember happened when a Boulton Paul Defiant night fighter aeroplane crashed one very dark night into a field close to a farm we knew as Top Farm and about a mile along a track that ran South over the hill above the village. It nose dived into the ground and it was said that the engine went so far down into the earth that it could not be recovered, so maybe it's still there. Apparently, after an engine failure, the crew of two baled out and landed safely at Ettington.

In 1940, as winter approached, night time air raids began on Birmingham and Coventry. German aircraft would be heard droning high overhead and searchlights and anti-aircraft guns could be seen and heard in those directions. On the night of the 14th November 1940 the Luftwaffe made a massive attack on the city of Coventry. Early that night I remember seeing a large red and orange reflection in the sky from fires burning in the direction of Coventry and a very noisy night followed from German aircraft flying overhead coupled with the sound of distant guns and explosions.

One night during that winter a German aircraft dropped masses of small incendiary bombs in the fields and pig rearing buildings around Top Farm. A

barn containing hay or straw was set alight and a few pigs were killed but there were no civilian casualties. The ground was fairly soft in many areas where the bombs fell due to recent rain and caused many of the bombs to fail to detonate. Many were found weeks later in some of the rougher grass and bushed areas where they had fallen. People questioned why the aircraft had bombed such a target, and it was mainly concluded that the buildings might have been mistaken for a military establishment.

One Saturday morning I was standing in the road just opposite the Fox Inn. The sky was overcast with fast moving low clouds. Suddenly a German aircraft, easily recognisable by its dark speckled camouflage momentarily broke through the cloud base and flying towards Wellesbourne Mountford aerodrome. I don't know whether it made any attack on the airfield but I have recently looked on the History of Wellesbourne Mountford Airfield Website and found that several attacks were made during May 1941. It now poses the question whether the aircraft I saw that morning at around 11 or 12 o'clock was responsible for one of those attacks. There was a strong westerly wind blowing that morning and its possible that the noise of any explosions would not have been heard in Loxley.

The RAF had established an Operational Training Unit at the newly constructed airfield and equipped with Vickers Wellington bombers. During training exercises accidents occurred and several aircraft crashed around Loxley with loss of the lives of the aircrews. A violent snowstorm occurred one night when exercises were progress and hearsay spread afterwards that eight aircraft were lost.

One summers evening I was on an errand to collect a prescription medicine from the doctor's surgery in Wellesbourne. As I cycled through the airfield I saw a Wellington aircraft coming into land at the north side of the airfield. The approach was too low and it crashed into a stream short of the runway and just north of the road from Stratford to Wellesbourne. On my way back from collecting the medicine I took that road back. When I arrived close to the crashed Wellington aircraft, a rescue party were carrying the crew on stretchers across the field to an ambulance. I could hear the crew talking to their rescuers and I supposed and hoped that they all survived. It was lucky that the aircraft did not catch fire.

On the occasion of another errand to Wellesbourne early on a foggy Sunday morning I was returning via the airfields northern and western perimeter roads and when passing a Wellington parked on a dispersal pad close to the road I saw a lone RAF maintenance man by the aircraft. I called over and asked him to let me have a look inside the aeroplane. He beckoned to me, and after establishing that I was a Boy Scout he allowed me to climb the ladder up into the bomb aimer and pilot's positions. A great thrill for 12 year old at that time. Quite against RAF regulations, but being a foggy Sunday morning airfield activity would have been pretty low with small risk of being

seen by anyone of superior rank. When I afterwards related my story to the other lads in the village I don't think many believed me!

On Sunday afternoons Loxley children were invited to attend Sunday School, conducted by a daughter of Mrs. Griffiths Jones and was held in a room of the Manor House. There was no Loxley resident vicar to conduct services in the church whilst I lived in Loxley. A vicar who lived at Ettington used to cycle in all weathers to conduct a Sunday service at the church. Sometimes it was in the morning and at other times in the afternoon. Fred Howkins was the organist at these services. Fred would frequently be heard playing his piano for his own enjoyment on a summers evening when the windows of his cottage would be wide open. The happy sounding tune called "Butterflies in the Rain" was his favourite tune and was always played during these sessions.

The only regular bus service came to the bottom of the hill on a Friday morning and returned in the early afternoon, so that people could go into Stratford upon Avon on to shop on a market day. Travel was restricted to the distance you could walk or cycle. There were few car owners and petrol was restricted with a very small ration granted only to those persons where it was essential for them to carry out their work, which had to be of wartime national importance. Mr. Bingley, an elderly gentleman, who lived halfway up the hill had a car and was used sparingly if a taxi journey was required. On the occasions when my parents came to visit me he would take them back to the railway station at Stratford upon Avon. The cost was 4 shillings, 20 pence in today's money, seems a small figure now but was considered quite costly in those days.

With Christmas of 1941 approaching several of the boys of the village and myself hatched a plan to sing carols on Christmas Eve at the house of "Blakes" the haulage contractor. It was known that it was usual for them to have a large gathering of their family and friends for a dinner party on that night of the year. The object of the plan was purely a business one, which we hoped would earn us a substantial amount of Xmas cash. We all put good effort into learning the words of the carols we intended to sing. Christmas Eve came and with flashlight torches and song sheets about five of us assembled and walked on a very dark night the mile or so to the house. After singing the first carol we were all invited into the hall and sang more carols just outside the room where the guests were assembled. It proved to be a highly successful and financially fruitful evening! Now, on occasions when I see a "Blakes of Loxley" lorry when driving on the motorway, and it always reminds me of that Christmas Eve in 1941.

In October of 1942 German air activity had reduced to a low level around London and my father decided that I should return home, and thus ended my time at Loxley. My two years and four months living in Loxley was mainly a happy period of my life and remains vivid in my memory.

I have made a few short visits to Loxley over the years when I have been motoring in the area. The last time was about ten years ago. Changes have happened since the time when I lived there, no shops now, and a few newer houses have sprung up. The War Memorial has been repositioned. It used to be sited at the very bottom of the hill but is now half way up. But in the main, Loxley still appears as I remember it. As has happened in most villages in England, people and families move away, and I wonder how many descendants of families I knew, still remain. The Internet Website of Loxley Village recently discovered contains many names of families that I can remember, and the Church Marriage Register contains some of the young ladies names I knew as children. It pleased me to see the 1949 marriage record of Peter Symonds and Joyce Jordan, who were school sweethearts and with whom I cycled to Wellesbourne School. In 1942 Peter's father was in the RAF at Wellesbourne Airfield and occupied a cottage for his family at the bottom of the hill, and Joyce was Mr. and Mrs. Jordan's eldest granddaughter.

I have written these recollections with the view that the reader will be familiar with the village of Loxley, either having lived there or perhaps is currently resident there. They are the events of 65 years ago and I must apologise for any inaccuracies you may find, as sometimes time will modify or distort ones memories. Should you find any, or have any relevant comments or additions I would be pleased to hear from you.

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There is a further account of my experiences of that time written in 1994 when I first retired from work. Last year I submitted it to the BBCs Peoples War Website and it can now be found at www.bbc.co.uk/ww2 It is entitled "Memories of a World War Two Evacuee". You should be able to find it by using their website search facility with these reference numbers: A2740187, A2740772, A2740808 or input "Loxley" or my name "Alec Turner". It is in three parts; the last is about my time at Loxley. I apologise for some duplication of events in this and my previous writings.

Alec R. Turner. June 2005