

# **WOODHURST**

**Before and during the  
Second World War**



In the thirties Woodhurst was a small quiet village of about 250 inhabitants. Many people worked on the farms that surrounded the village ring. Derek Cannon gave a graphic description of the village at that time.

*There weren't any paths it was just a complete road from one side to the other, no grills for drainage, and it wasn't until they brought the water through in the late thirties that the Council decided to do something about the kerbs and the paths,*



*Before the water arrived everybody got their water from a well or pump. The village pump at that time was in good going order, and we used to go and fetch pails of water. Electricity did not come to the village until after the war. Light was provided by oil lamps Gerald Bozeat remembered the Tilly lamps they had in the pub, one by the dart board , one in the middle and in the kitchen one of those lamps with a mantle on.*



*There was hardly any traffic at that time. There were only three or four cars in the village. The shop had a van and my father had one. He would go into Cambridge to sell vegetables he had grown. There were very few telephones in the village, my father had one and so did the stores and Post Office.*



There were five main centres in the village. The shop, the pub, the school, the church and the chapel.

The shop was also the Post Office, they made their own bread, and kept most things, including pots and pans and shoes. If they had not got what people wanted they would get it by the next day.

The pub was the Travelers Arms (now St John's House) This was the only remaining pub from the five that were in Church Street at one time. It was the social hub of the village unless you were strict chapel goer.

The school took children from Old Hurst in addition to Woodhurst. It was built on the side of the Baptist Chapel and began its life as a British School. It became a Council School after the 1871 Education Act when education became free for all.. Gerald Bozeat's description of the school

*There was two rooms in the school, a little room and a big room and they used to have a partition that slid across. You started in the little room and then when you got a bit older you went into the big room. Miss Knowles was the head teacher there, Dolly Knowles was what we used to call her. She was very strict, she had a pointed hat with a D written on it, like a witch's hat. And if you got into any sort of trouble she used to stick this hat on you and you had to sit in the corner.*

The number of children in the school in 1939 was about 30.

There was not complete harmony between the church and the chapel. Derek Cannon stated *The chapel were very strict. They looked on the church as a dirty word, you weren't really supposed to go to church if you were chapel people, and the church people looked down on the chapel people and there was always a bit of undercurrent. The only time they really mixed was on Feast Day in June. There was always a big do,*

There were a number of social events in the village such as concerts and whist drives and there were also Boy Scout and Girl Guide troops. The Scouts were very adventurous, even going to Bruges one summer .



Even before the war started some of the population of Woodhurst became involved in Britain's preparations.. About 1937 they began to build the hangers at RAF Wyton, and a number of people who had been working in agriculture in the village went to work there, They earned considerable amounts of money helping to build the aerodrome.

What happened when war was declared. Derek Cannon said *It completely altered the village life. The young men were called up they went into the various services and the older men if possible they left the farms and went to work in the aerodrome. People that hadn't left the village all their life suddenly realized that there was something else out there.. Those men that weren't called up became Local Defence Volunteers which ultimately became the Home Guard, and we played about playing as soldiers. We spent a lot of time patrolling roads and helping the army with manoeuvres*

*We used to patrol along the Wheatsheaf Road and Old Hurst Road, looking over St Ives you could see the anti aircraft shells bursting and the fires on the clouds when they were*

*blitzing London. We didn't get any bombing here. They dropped four bombs in a row down the Pidley Old Hurst Road, and opposite Pidley Sheep Lane they had a satellite aerodrome when a raid came on they would switch the lights on. The Germans used to bomb that instead of Wyton.*

Another great change in the village was the coming of the evacuees. They almost all came from London a completely different environment to Woodhurst, it was a little bit like oil and water. They didn't mix too well. The first arrivals were a group of girls from Highbury High School. As Derek Cannon stated *I mean Rural life for High School girls basically isn't on. They've got to be in a town to get the education. It upset all the youth of the village because all the young men from the village from 14 upwards were surrounded by very knowledgeable young women from London. It was quite illuminating. They were eventually moved on to the Huntingdon area and went to the Grammar School.*

More evacuees followed. But not as one whole unit with a teacher. There were three dates when a group arrived, November 1940, September 1942 and July 1944. However few of them stayed for long. Many returning after a few months. This was unsettling for this small village school which usually had only about 30 children. These children must have been bewildered when they arrived. They were astounded by the huge skies and many had no idea that milk came from cows. Difficult too for the village children who probably had never met such different children before.

Reports show that the village also became involved in events to help the war effort. A committee was formed in 1941 at a meeting when a lady from the Women's Institute Federation explained the rules and workings of the national scheme for jam making. Miss G Reynolds was elected chairman of the local committee and Mrs Coote supervisor of jam bottling and labeling. Mrs Evans offered the use of one of the rooms in her house.

The Home Guard held an exhibition of various weapons used in their drill and practice, this was followed by a concert by the Saxon Concert Party from Whittlesey and a talk by a member of the Red Cross on Warship Week.

In 1942 there was a lecture on gas explaining the difference between persistent and non persistent gases and how to deal with them All the gasmasks in the village were examined to make sure they were in good working order..

A report in the local paper in 1942 states *This little village is making a good effort for the special salvage drive. A long book trail was organized by Mrs Watson, the Salvage Officer, assisted by Miss G Reynolds MVS and by an excited enthusiastic group of school children, who enjoyed the novel job of laying out books along the village street. Other things for salvage are also coming in well.*

Wings for Victory Week in 1943 included a dance organized by members of the RAF, an entertainment by the schoolchildren. *And the children led by Mrs Coote, Hon Secretary of the Savings Committee marched round the village with flags and banners. Singing they exhorted the people to make their utmost effort during Wings Week.* There was a film show on Thursday and a social on Friday



Mrs Coote seems to have been an active organizer of the Savings Committee. The Red Cross had a penny a week fund for children, there was the War Savings Fund. The school children also collected silver paper for the Mansion House Fund and caught several hundred butterflies under the War agricultural Committee Scheme. Members of the forces from the surrounding gave of their time to help with village activities and made toys for the children at Christmas.

The pub in the village, The Travellers Arms was very busy, being so close to the airfields, Wyton and Warboys. Gerald Bozeat who lived in the pub with his family described life there. *We were packed every night we were literally mown out with people, aircrew people. You couldn't see across the place it was just thick with cigarette smoke. They all used to bike down, the aircrew lads you know, on their bikes and chucking them all outside, and they'd all get drunk and sing, and somebody would get on the piano, and it was great really, that part of it. And they'd come round the next night and Dad would say ' Well, where's Fred?' Oh he went for a burton last night. The crews all stuck together, they played worked and died together really.*

Being so close to several airfields must have made life very interesting for the village. Derek Robinson recalls counting the aircraft as they left Wyton on their sorties. He said they flew in so low on their return you thought they would hit your chimneys. Luckily for the village they escaped the war without being bombed at all.

No-one from the village serving in the forces was killed in the war, but several had narrow escapes. Gunner Arthur Furniss of the Royal Artillery was evacuated from Dunkirk. The newspaper report states *Gunner Furniss suffered from his nerves on his arrival in England, but now he has had a rest and treatment he feels almost himself again and is ready and willing to go where his country needs him.* He went to North Africa and then on to Italy where he was wounded. His brother Leslie was wounded in France.

In 1945 at the end of the war members of the forces taken prisoner in the war arrived back home. Trooper Don Hart returned to his parents Mr and Mrs Herbert Hart after 4 and a half years in POW camp in Austria. He was captured in Greece in 1941. Mrs Carter's son was captured in Tunis in 1943 and rescued by Americans. Both of these stated that they do not know what they would have done without the Red Cross parcels. Dr Rees who had been a prisoner of the Japanese in Shanghai arrived home in time to spend Christmas with his wife and children.

Woodhurst in 1945 was a different village to Woodhurst in 1939, although it did not suffer any damage by bombs and no parishioner was killed on active service, yet being where they were in the middle of a number of airfields the inhabitants realized the seriousness of the situation. The importance of saving for and supporting fund raising efforts for wartime charities and causes played a n important part in village life. And the arrival of evacuees brought children from a different environment to this previously quiet little village.



