

THE LOCAL DEFENCE VOLUNTEERS

Iain Wakeford 2017



Most people know them now as 'Dad's Army' or the 'Home Guard', but originally they were known as the Local Defence Volunteers set up by the Secretary of State for War, Anthony Eden, in the spring of 1940. Within a few minutes of the end

of his speech being broadcast on the BBC (on Tuesday 14th May), seventy men in Woking had volunteered with fifty more in Byfleet offering their services the following morning (the rifle range at Silvermere almost immediately being put at their disposal)!

The men (and boys) of the Old Woking Home Guard



Within a couple of days 400 men had enrolled in Woking and over the next few weeks meetings continued to be held in the surrounding villages – Woking originally coming under the 1st Surrey (Camberley) Battalion, before being split and re-formed as the 11th Surrey Battalion in October 1942.

At first it was just volunteers but eventually men in reserved occupations were conscripted into the Home Guard, increasing the numbers quite considerably. Platoons were set up in most local villages such as Byfleet, Old Woking and Horsell, with works platoons at companies such as the Woking Electric Supply Company (WESCO), G Q Parachutes off Walton Road and



The men of Wesco on parade in Walton Road



One exercise on Horsell Common nearly ended in a riot when the army refused to open the Naafi at Fair Oaks for the Home Guard to have a well-earned cuppa.

the Southern Railway (12th Surrey, 3rd Southern Railway Battalion) –meeting originally in the Station Master's office at Woking before an empty carriage was set up for their meetings in the station yard.

Equipment was at times pretty basic with old Boar War (let alone Great War) weapons being brought out at first to help train and equip the men. It was not uncommon at the start for broom-handles to replace guns for some during training and for the few guns that were available to be passed from one person to the next as they took over on duty.

Unfortunately the image now of 'Dad's Army' is of a bungling bunch of old men and young boys totally unprepared for any enemy invasion, but that is not necessarily the case. Locally at least they appear to have been well trained, with exercises at Bisley Camp and on places such as Horsell Common, where on at least one occasion they faced Canadian, Polish and Free French troops in a mock-battle for control of Mizens Farm and Fair Oaks Airport. The exercise in the summer of 1941 appears to have been a great success, although it almost ended in a riot when the Officer in Command at Fair Oaks initially refused to open the Naafi tea room!

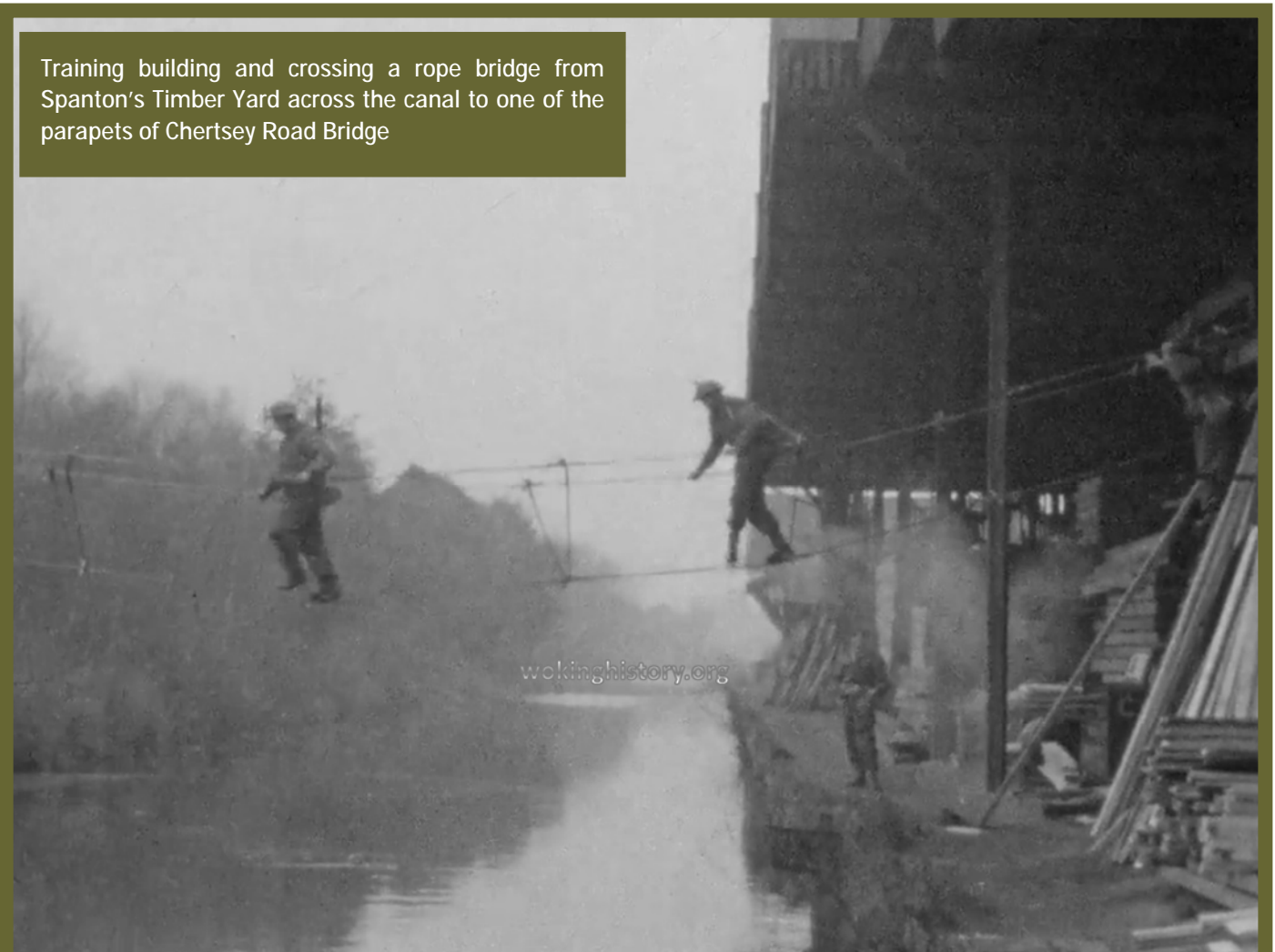
As the war progressed each group seemed to have its own quirky item of equipment. The men at Sorbo Rubber Products at Maybury (who had their own platoon) improvised a portable 'anti-aircraft' weapon; a Browning Machine Gun

attached to a pram with a ratchet that made it easy to adjust the gun to fire up at any angle. Whether or not it was ever successfully fired in anger I cannot say.

At James Walker's Lion works another local branch produced their own armoured vehicle –

an Armstrong Sidely car with layers of $\frac{3}{4}$ inch thick metal plates attached to it and a slit for the driver to see through. It was all very good apart from the fact that the wheels and rubber tyres were totally unprotected and would have been useless if there was ever a proper attack.

Training building and crossing a rope bridge from Spanton's Timber Yard across the canal to one of the parapets of Chertsey Road Bridge



The 11th Battalion made the WESCO works in North Road their 'keep' – the vital building that they would defend at all costs. One of the members, Dennis Batten, recalled later that 'battle sections' were then deployed in surrounding buildings. 'I was stationed in the premises of Woking Glass, on the corner of North Road. Another section was defending the house at the top of Board School Road, the third section had its fortified base in a house on the corner of North Road and Walton Road. This in effect meant that every approach to the keep was covered by one of the fire teams. If the Germans managed to overcome a single position its defenders could have retired to the keep under covering fire from the other sections'.

The Manager of the Lion Works had great confidence in his Home Guard telling Major J W B Farmer that his factory was 'absolutely impenetrable'. According to an interview many years later with the Major's daughter he decided to check if that was true and so walked along the railway from Byfleet to Maybury 'dressed in railwaymen's attire', swinging rail-workers tools and pretending to inspect the track. When he reached the Lion Works he 'simply walked straight in unchallenged. Lack of security point proved'!

Major Farmer (the son of the founder of John Farmer shoe shops), lived in Oriental Road not far from the Lion Works. He had served with the Tank Corp during the First World War in the



Middle East where he apparently became interested in Islam. He converted to Islam just before the Second World War and was later a trustee of the Woking Mosque Trust. After the war he was awarded an MBE for his services to civil defence.

Fortunately quite a number of photographs of our local Home Guard survive, with a couple of

Training on Wheatsheaf Recreation Ground

films in the archives showing training at Bisley Camp and on the canal at Woking. There are also the memories of many of the men involved, so that we can be certain that if the German's had invaded, our Dad's Army would have been as ready as they could be to try to defend their little corner of the kingdom.



Local Home Guard's parade along Chobham Road and on Wheatsheaf Rec



At the end of the war Woking Council showed their appreciation by issuing certificates.

1939  1945

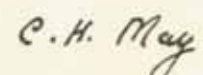
THE WOKING URBAN DISTRICT COUNCIL
on behalf of the residents in the **Urban District**,
desires to acknowledge
the loyal and devoted service of all those
who have served, in any capacity,
in the **CIVIL DEFENCE** and allied **SERVICES**
throughout the **SECOND WORLD WAR**.

While the **D**istrict has been fortunate
in that the severity of the attacks,
the number of casualties and the amount of damage
have been relatively light,
the **K**eenness and **E**fficiency of all personnel
have been very noticeable and
deserving of the highest praise.
Undoubtedly **A**ll would have risen
to the occasion of any greater call.

THIS ACKNOWLEDGMENT is handed to
Mr. F. H. Compton
in recognition of his personal share
in the common effort on behalf of the **C**ommunity
as evidence
that it is fully understood and appreciated.



Clerk to the Council and Sub-Controller



Chairman of the Council

1939  1945

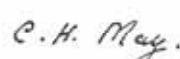
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in recognition of his personal share
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Clerk to the Council and Sub-Controller



Chairman of the Council



In the years when our Country
was in mortal danger

WILLIAM BRUCE COLLIER

who served 20 May 1940 - 31 Dec. 1944.
gave generously of his time and
powers to make himself ready
for her defence by force of arms
and with his life if need be.



THE HOME GUARD

THE BROADMEAD'S HEAVY ANTI-AIRCRAFT COMMAND POST



Some local people believe that the Old Woking Home Guard were in control of the old 'gun battery' on the Broadmeads but in truth the Command Post was manned by soldiers of the 344 Battery of the 109 Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment. The huts where they stayed was apparently on the meadows nearby, until they realised that the land was too damp and they turned the camp over to the local women's ATS!

There were four 3.7" guns mounted on wheels that could be moved and removed from the site in a matter of minutes. This was one of six heavy anti-aircraft gun sites set up to defend Brooklands, built according to official records in 1942. What is left is just the Command Centre where there was no doubt a plotting room, a telecommunications room and offices, with searchlights and a heightfinder to locate the enemy aircraft.



THE BASINGSTOKE CANAL - OUR LAST LINE OF DEFENCE

In May 1940, after the evacuation from Dunkirk, it was feared Hitler's forces would soon invade this country, so a survey was carried out under the orders of General Sir Edmund Ironside, to make a detailed plan to build lines of defence to delay any invading army. A month later the plan was complete and work began on building the thousands of pill-boxes, anti-tank obstacles and gun emplacements that would form the GHQ line. In Woking, the Basingstoke Canal was to form part of one of those lines, as Tim Denton records in his book 'Wartime Defences on the Basingstoke Canal' (Surrey & Hampshire Canal Society, 2009). 'Teams of men toiled under extreme conditions for long hours, building materials were in short supply and sometimes local improvisation and adaptation on site was required. Fear of Luftwaffe aerial reconnaissance was always present so sites had to be camouflaged very carefully during and after construction'.

The Royal Engineers were apparently aided by council contractors, local builders and the unemployed, but it is not known who actually built the pill-boxes in Woking – only a couple of which can still be seen beside the canal. One is by Pirbright Bridge (above) were a 'type 26 prefabricated' pill box is still accessible,



whilst the walls of another can be seen acting as a back-yard wall beside Kiln Bridge in St John's (below). One by Stumps Bridge was sadly demolished when the canal was being restored in the 1980's, whilst the crossing at Hermitage Bridge appears to have been

guarded further back from the canal, where the tunnel and railway embankment at Blackhorse Road made an ideal trap. A rectangular Infantry Box can still be seen in the trees to the south and east of the railway arch – hidden to catch out Hitler's forces.

