

Children's experiences of World War II in Oxfordshire

Some of those gathered to hear Liz Woolley's talk to Faringdon Peace Group in March were old enough to remember being children during World War II. For the younger ones, Liz, a local historian and writer, painted a very vivid picture of how the lives of children in this area were affected by the war, using her own research and interviews with local people and those who came to the area as workers and evacuees. She covered changes to the environment, disruption to home and school life, evacuation and what happened at the end of the war.

At the beginning of the war there was fear and excitement, a sense that the waiting was over and an urgency to build shelters and make other preparations. Although Oxfordshire escaped most of the bombing it was heavily involved in war work due to its position of safety well behind the front line. It was important for agriculture, manufacturing and reconditioning, military training and recovery with numerous army camps, airfields and munitions stores. Although these sites would appear to make Oxford a target, mysteriously the city was never bombed.

Children's daily lives were disrupted by air raid warnings, emergency drills at home and school and noise from the high level of military and air traffic. Rationing meant an end to sugary treats. Wartime games and toys were often military based. With fathers away, women took over the household and often paid jobs as well, so children saw less of their parents and spent more time in childcare. Children also contributed to the war effort: collecting salvage, picking potatoes and other farm work, gathering useful fruits, medicinal plants and sheep's wool from the countryside. Boys were employed in tank factories at MG to do more fiddly tasks and girls knitted for the troops. All sorts of materials were recycled and money saved. In Faringdon, £1,500 was raised for a Spitfire. Boys who worked as runners for the top secret auxiliary unit at Coleshill were given a rubber allowance for their roller skates!

There was a sense of disorientation as new airfields, camps and river defences on the Thames changed the landscape and road signs were removed. One man at the meeting remembered bombs being stored along the sides of fields. Military activity left hazards such as shrapnel and unexploded ammunition. The huge salvage yard at Cowley became an exciting playground.

Due to its relatively safe location, Oxfordshire received POWs, refugees and tens of thousands of evacuees, which boosted its population by 10% - 20%. Families were obliged to take evacuees even if they had little space. Many evacuees were well looked after but others suffered hostility and cruelty at the hands of both adults and children, causing psychological distress and lasting damage. They looked different, spoke differently and were often rowdier and more self-reliant. Hill End and Radley College provided temporary accommodation for evacuees. Lord Faringdon not only housed Basque refugees at Buscot House but also a school which was evacuated from Poplar. In other places where whole schools were evacuated with their teachers, the school day was arranged so that locals had school in the morning and evacuees in the afternoon. Kinder Transport children were put up at Abingdon School. Some Oxfordshire children were sent away to Canada, America, New Zealand and South Africa to escape the war. In general, evacuation broadened the horizons of local children and improved the health of evacuees.

Schools were closed for 2 days of celebration when the war ended. Returning fathers were often strangers to their younger children, who had grown in their absence. Many children suffered bereavement when fathers did not return and some came back injured. Women had tasted independence but many returned to the home to leave jobs for the men.

Liz, who previously spoke to the group about the Spanish Civil War, gave us a really good sense of what it was like to live through the war as a child in Oxfordshire. She gives talks and guided walks on a wide range of local history topics and is highly recommended. See www.lizwoolley.co.uk .

FPG's April 5th meeting will be a talk about Yemen with local NGO worker Jonathan Puddifoot.