Teenage Memories of Wartime Emsworth

When she was seventeen, Eileen Cunningham (nee Purches), moved with her parents into “Richmond House”, Havant Road. They moved from Portsmouth following the heavy bombing raids in 1942. Her earlier memories included witnessing the return of tired and bandaged troops passing though Havant, following the disastrous Dieppe Raid.

Eileen Cunningham

The Victorian house, on the north side of the road was on the site of the present garage adjacent to the King`s Arms with, at that time, a grass verge to the roadway. A keen dancer, Eileen recalls the many dances that were held in the British Legion Hall in North Street on the site now occupied by the flats and public car park to the rear of Tesco.

The dances were attended by local girls and girls from the women`s services. Most eligible local males were in the services, but there were plenty of service units stationed locally.

In the run up to D-Day the local units were mainly Canadian, but there were also Free French Sailors in North Emsworth, Naval units in Bedhampton, the RAF at Thorney including some Polish airmen, and Marines at Warblington, so there was no shortage of partners. Eileen also attended dances at Cosham where the males were largely G.I`s.

The dances in the British Legion Hall had a live band of older men over recruitment age and the cost of entry was 1/6d (One shilling and six pence), 7½ p in today’s money. Dances finished at 9pm to allow service personnel time to get back to camp before the 10pm curfew.

Special buses were laid on for Thorney Island troops, but others had to make their own way on foot. Eileen remembers the troops as mostly good dancers and very polite, especially to young ladies. She could recall only one small incident of trouble, which involved Free French troops.

There was a YMCA canteen over the International Store in South Street and a Toch-H canteen over the then Gas Company Showroom, now the site of the Co-op store.

In the build up to D-Day, Emsworth was a restricted area, as were most coastal districts, and movement between counties was checked by police road blocks, the local road block being on the bridge over the Ems on the main road. (now the A259). Eileen was stopped and questioned by police and had to produce her identity card before being allowed into West Sussex to attend her dance classes, even though the classes were held in a building within sight of the border.

In the days prior to the landings, there was constant movement of tanks and transports along all the local roads, and on the final night there were vehicles and troops parked all the way along Havant Road, and her father went out to chat with them that evening.

In the morning they were all gone and the whole area was blanketed in what she described as an eerie silence. Later that day she witnessed the gliders being towed out over the channel as the second wave went over.

Richmond House formerly in Havant Road

Rationing

At the start of the Second World War in 1939, Britain`s population of around 50 million people imported 70% of its food requirements. The government had begun planning for wartime food rationing in 1936, and ration books had been printed in 1938, and issued to the public five days after war was declared in September 1939. (Buff for adults; Green for pregnant women and nursing mothers and Blue for children).

For most rationed foods, the public had to decide and register with a particular shopkeeper, in order that the Ministry of Food could allocate the correct amounts to the various shops. (No supermarkets in those days, just independent Butchers & Grocers etc).

There was no “Shopping around”; once registered, it was difficult to change your supplier until new ration books were issued. (Annually). You needed to keep on good terms with your chosen shopkeeper if you wanted a fair share of rare but un-rationed goods. Any un-rationed goods like Fish, Rabbit, or Offal, some vegetables and imported fruits, were in very short supply and meant a long-time spent queuing. Queuing became a way of life, particularly for housewives, and could occupy a large part of the day.

Initially, coupons had to be used in the week marked on the coupon, but this was relaxed a little later, to be carried over for two, or on some items, four weeks.

In December 1941 an additional, separate, ration book was issued for “Points Rationing”, for previously un-rationed foodstuffs. These were initially, tinned goods, dried fruits, cereals, legumes and biscuits. These coupons could be used at any time, in any store, for whatever “Points” rationed goods you preferred. The Ministry could, and did, manipulate the purchases of various “Points” goods by changing the number of points required for items, dependent upon their availability, and attractiveness to the public. When first introduced, a tin of Salmon and a tin of Spam were both 16 points. Spam was not popular and became 8 points and Salmon went up to 24 points. (The prices didn’t change).

Petrol was the first thing to be rationed in September 1939 and the use of petrol for private motoring ended completely in 1942. Only official users, such as the emergency services, buses, farmers, some essential delivery services, doctors etc. and, of course the Armed Services could use petrol, and this was coloured to prevent unofficial use.

Other goods gradually came under rationing regulations as the war progressed and the amounts were varied at times as conditions demanded. You could be fairly certain that, “If it wasn’t rationed, it wasn’t available”. In total, rationing, in some form, lasted for over 14 years. (Sept ‘39 to July ’54).

The rationing of Milk varied depending on the time of year and availability. Large quantities were used to make the “National Cheddar”, the only cheese allowed to be made. The basic milk ration was two pints per week, but up to 3 or 3 ½ pints in some summer months. (Milk was still delivered, and on hot summer days could go sour very quickly if left). Cloths rationing started at 66 coupons per year but was gradually reduced to 48, then to 36, and finally in 1945 to 24 coupons. An overcoat took 18, men`s shoes 9, ladies shoes 7, and even a tie, one coupon. The amount of material in garments was controlled. No double-breasted jackets, no turn-ups, no pleats and a maximum skirt length. Soap rationing included all forms of soap, bar soap, soap flakes and soap powder, and the allowance was four coupons per month. One coupon purchased a 3 oz bar or 6 oz of soap powder or 3 oz of flakes.

Rationing was strict, but reasonably fair. The rich could eat out, but the working man, and woman, had works canteens and “British Restaurants”, all of which had a limit on their menu. It was illegal to feed human food to animals, even bread to birds.

Ration Books

Rationed goods including dried eggs & milk

Clothes Rationing - Dress 7 coupons

Clothes Rationing - Suit 26 coupons