

# Eileen Cunningham

## Teenage Memories of Wartime Emsworth



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



Richmond House was on the north side of Havant Road, on the site of the present garage adjacent to the King's Arms with, 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, 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 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 roadblocks, the local roadblock 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.