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Cormorants and Lovebirds

Henley in Edwardian Times: The Election in 1906

Military Camps at Nettlebed

Memories from Early Childhood of Wartime Henley

Henley-on-Thames Archaeological and Historical Group

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Editorial

Susanna Venn

As a relatively new member of the Group, I have been struck by the varied and colourful nature of Henley's history and am pleased to see this reflected in the Journal of 2024.

We start this Journal in the peaceful tranquillity of Fawley Court, fishing alongside the cormorants which still occupy that stretch of the Thames today. The courtship of Sir Bulstrode Whitelocke and his wealthy neighbour, Mistress Willoughby of Hambleden Manor, turns into a romantic whirlwind that could easily have inspired contemporaries of Jane Austen.

Henley's part of the general elections of 1906 is then discussed, and interesting parallels can perhaps be drawn from the discontents of politics in the 1900s and today's ever changing political landscape. A convincing win in 1906 for the Liberals would be echoed in 2024!

The last two articles in this edition recall some events of the Second World War. As we look towards May 2025 and the 80th anniversary of VE Day, it is fitting that two articles in this edition feature how Henley and the surrounding area were affected by the global conflict. We focus first on the military camps at Nettlebed, bridge building across the Thames at Henley, tanks rolling around the Chilterns, and troops stationed there who would play a pivotal role in the outcome of the war.

Finally, we turn to the recollections of childhood in Henley in the Second World War. Seen through the eyes of a child, the events of D-Day and Victory in Europe were perhaps not the pivotal moments that they appear to be in the history textbooks of today, unlike for example, a trip to the seaside!

I hope you enjoy this edition of the journal.
Susanna Venn, October 2024

Cormorants and Lovebirds

Chris Whitehead

Figure 1: Sir Bulstrode Whitelocke. Photo credit: Palace of Westminster collection.

The most important man in the Henley area in 1635 was Sir Bulstrode[1] Whitelocke, a widower and owner of Phyllis Court, Fawley Court and several properties in Henley. He was Recorder of Abingdon (1632–49), of Oxford (1647–49), of Bristol (1651–55), and Counsel for Henley (1632). He was elected for Stafford in the parliament of 1626. In 1640, he was chosen Member for Great Marlow in the Long Parliament.

The story of how he pursued Frances Willoughby of Hambleden Manor to be his second wife is quite charming.

The following are extracts from his diary[2].

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[1]His curious Christian name was insisted on by his notorious uncle, Edmund Whitelocke, being one of the godfathers, who announced that the child was to be called Bulstrode. The vicar demurred, but Edmund demanded that he bear his mother's name, "Bulstrode or Elizabeth, let them choose which they please".

[2] As edited by Ruth Spalding, The Improbable Puritan.

After the death of his first wife, Rebecca, in 1634, Whitelocke ….

> *….removed with his childe to Fawley Court where he recreated himselfe in fishing with Cormorants*[3]*, for which sport he had made a pond, & an arche of bricke, with a Banquetting House upon it of costly flint worke which stood neer the Thames, & had a fayre gravell walke from the house unto it.*

Whitelocke enjoyed entertaining at Fawley Court, much to the chagrin of his old family retainer, William Cooke. William advised him that he needed a wife to manage his domestic affairs, and just such a person was living at the New House[4] in Hambleden with her aunt, the dowager Countess of Sunderland.

> *….He took account & advice for the management of his private estate. And made use of William Cooke, an old servant & tenant to his father, who spake his mind plainly to his Master telling him that the resort of so much company to him was too chargeable & would in time waste his estate, for oddes would beate any gentleman, he told him likewise that many of his goods were imbeziled and lost for want of a woman to looke to them, & wished him to thinke of getting a good wife to help him in household matters, wherin he had no skill, & recommended to him the Countess of Sunderland's Niece Mistress Wiloughby,*

Figure 2: Frances Willoughby, portrait by Michael Dahl. Credit: Wikipedia

[3] At the English and French courts of the 16th and 17th century the kings practised cormorant fishing as a leisure activity.

[4] It was built in 1603, so was still 'new'. Now Hambleden Manor House

who lived with her Aunt att Hambleden & was (he said) a comely houswifly maiden.

The young lady in question was twenty-year-old Frances Willoughby, daughter of the 3rd Baron Willoughby of Parham.

Initially, Whitelocke affected not to be interested in seeking a second wife, but he soon found an excuse to visit the Countess, assuring himself that he was so far from any thought of wooing that he went along in his old working clothes, his hair unkempt and looking about 50[5]. An unlikely story!

….After his return home[6], he tooke order to clense the great pond or mote at Fawley Court[7], being overgrown with weeds, & unwholesome with the deepe mudde in it, & the water being among springes rising and falling with the Thames, was difficult to be gotten out, butt for their helpe in it, his people had borrowed an Engine, which the Countesse of Sutherland's miller used bout his waterworks, & the Countess willingly lent it to Whitelocke which stood him in great stead in that work & he thought himself obliged in civility to waite on the Countesse to give her thankes for it, & he was so farre from any thoughts of wooing, that he went with his haire all overgrown on his face, so that he appeared as one 50 years old, his doublet was of black leather, his breeches of course hair stuffe, in mourning, only his horse was hansome & the French boy waiting on him in good clothes.

He was talking to the Countess when her niece came into the room, and Whitelocke was smitten….

….In this Equipage he waited on the Countesse, & was received by her with all civility and respect, whilest they were discourcing, her Niece Mistress Willoughby came into the roome; her habit was plain but neate, her person was most beautiful and lovely, so that upon the first sight of her, Whitelocke was strangely surprised, & struck with an high affection for her. She herselfe told him afterwards, that when she and the gentlewomen with her, heard that Mr Whitelocke was with her Aunt, she said in drollerye, come lett us goe see the widower,

[5] He was 29.
[6] From a trip to Dorset.
[7] Perhaps the inlet of water between the house and the Thames as depicted in this modern image, rather than a moat of which no trace has been found.

perhappes we may have good of him & thereupon she came into the Roome, which she used not to do when there were strangers.

He realised that that he had to win over the Countess if he was going to get anywhere with Frances….

….Whitelocke minded Mistress Willoughby more than his discourse with the Countesse, yet concealed his wounds[8]*, only he gave occasion by the offer of his service & attendance upon the Countess, for her to invite him & to tell him what he desired to hear, that he should be welcome to Hambleden. He said nothing to William Cooke, nor to any other, of this rencontre, nor did he presently pursue it.*

He struck on the notion of taking them both cormorant fishing in the hope he may find an opportunity to declare his affection.…

….A short time later, he visited the Lady Sunderland & saw her niece with her & both of them were very civill to him, he waited on them a fishing with his Cormorants, & shewed them excellent sport, with which they were much delighted, & by often visits, being well acquainted in the house, he tooke an opportunity of privacy with the young Lady, & frankly made known his affection & suit to her, & received a modest and generall answear, and no denying from her , which gave him some hopes and incouragement in that buisnes.

The Countess encouraged the courtship….

….Shortly after, with the consent of his Mistress, he acquainted her Aunt with his suit & Purpose, & desired her leave, that he might be a suitor & servant to her niece, & to have her Ladyship's favour & assistance therein, & he informed her of his estate, butt enquired nothing touching her Niece's portion. The Countess was not displeased with the motion, butt freely and with liking, gave way to him to be a suitor to her Niece, & he lost no opportunity to make use of that favour butt endeavoured, & not in vain, to settle himself in the affection of his Mistress, & God was pleased exceedingly to blesse them therin.

Things seemed to be going so well that he invited them to Fawley Court.…

[8] Affection

….The Countess and her Niece, did much delight in fishing, & Whitelocke was good att that sport, & often waited on them with his Cormorants, & with a whery which he had for the pleasure of the River, with a well[9] *in it, Anchors, Oares, and sayle, & in this boat, the Countess and her niece, did him the honour sometimes to be rowed from Mill End to Fawley Court, where they were pleased to accept the entertainment of the place.*

The Countess was also much delighted with musicke wherein she was skillfull herself, and kept a great Master of musicke in her house, & in this likewise Whitelocke's company was pleasing to her, & she seemed much taken with the musicke in his house wherewith sometimes he entertained her.

The Countess reciprocated his hospitality by inviting him to meals at Hambleden.…

….By these pleasing means, & by often waiting on her, or rather on her Niece, & seeking to humour her, he gained so much in the Countess's favour, that she often invited him to meales, an unusual favour from her who lived most retiredly, though very nobly, & Whitelocke was not shye to accept these favours, she also honoured him with her presence att his house, & with the presence of his dearest Mistress who was her constant & only Companion.

The time had come for Whitelocke to seek the approval of the senior male members of the family….

….He made use of all favours and opportunities (& the Countess saw it) to promote his interest in her Niece's affection, the which he gained prosperously, & to remove obstructions he intreated the Countess & his Mistress to write to Lady Willoughby, sister of the Countess & mother to her Niece, to acquaint her with his suit to her daughter, and to intreat her approbation of it, & to the same effect to write to the Lord Willoughby, & to the Earl Rutland her Uncle, to whom he was a stranger.

Their support was not forthcoming. The Earl of Rutland soon put a stop to any further romantic intentions; his niece (and her inheritance) could not

[9] A tank in which the fish could be preserved alive.

be allowed to fall into the hands of a commoner. Whitelocke was forbidden from visiting the New House….

….By this time, through the Blessing of God, Whitelocke had gained a firme interest in the affection of her whom he best loved, & it fell out happily for him that it was so, there being now sett on foot some attempts and designes to crosse him in it, whereof he had notice from a loving neighbour that the Earl of Rutland, & the Lord Willoughby, had bin att Hambleden, & sought to hinder his happiness, and to brake of the match between him and his Mistress, & that this was endeavoured in his absence in London.

Figure 3: Lord Willoughby 1643. Photo Credit: National Portrait Gallery.

He returned quickly[10] *into the Countrye to Hambleden to his deare Mistress who was still the same to him, though the Countenance & humour of her Aunt was much altered. His beard being trimmed, and he better clothed than before was not unpleasing, & now his servants and neighbours tooke notice of his being a suitor to Mistress Willoughby, which some envyed.*

From his Mistress chiefly, and from others, he learned that her brother the Lord Willoughby had bin att Hambleden & sent for William Cooke, as William also told him, that her brother & her Uncle the Earle of Rutland were both against her match with Whitelocke & that the Earl had positively written to his Sister not to permit it to proceed, nor to suffer him any more to visit his Niece; the Countess herselfe told Whitelocke in effect as much, & that it was the opinion of the nearest & best of her Niece's friends, that it would not be a convenient match for her with Whitelocke & desired that it might proceed no further.

[10] From London

Whitelocke could not understand why, at this late stage in their relationship, he was being asked to cease all contact with Frances. He protested that he was not after her money….

> *….Whitelocke answeared that he esteemed her Ladyship the nearest & best of her Niece's friends, & next to her Mother, & that he had her consent to the Match, & did much wonder that now it should be endeavoured to be broken off, after so long and hopeful a progresse in it, & nothing propounded on his part for settlement of Estate, butt should be made good, by her Niece's friends, & no contradiction before this by any of them. Butt the Countess replyed, that upon further consideration of the business, it was now their desire and judgement, that this match should not proceed, & she desired Whitelocke to forbeare any further applications to her Niece in that way, & in effect forbid him her house.*

He was at pains to emphasise that he had behaved honourably at all times….

> *….He considered that in this business he had used no indirect or unlawful means, that there was no dishonour or dishonest ends in it, that he had taken order for her mother, brother & Uncle to be acquainted with it, that her Mother had not contradicted it, that her brother was a young lord who had not the disposing of his Sister, that her Uncle had his Niece's portion in his hands, & occasions for the use of it, that her Aunt had approved it, & now after it had gone so farre & their affections settled, to commaund it as their Lordship's pleasure to be broken off, could not well be digested by Whitelocke nor would his affections submit to it, which were faithful and engaged, & therefore he resolved, notwithstanding his great opposers, to endeavour to accomplish his just and honest ends, & to make himself happy by it.*

Whitelocke would not be put off. He sent notes to Frances hidden within the produce that William Cooke's wife took to the Countess at the New House….

> *….This was a severe sentence, & put Whitelocke into great perplexity & trouble & now his personal attendance being prohibited, he made his addresses to his Mistress by letters in a private way, by means of William Cooke's wife, who formerly used to bring little Countrey presents to her, & now began again that trade, & in the bottom of her*

basket had usually a letter to his Mistress from Whitelocke & carried back her answear to him, also he had a good friend in the house, an antient gentlewoman, kinswoman of the Countess & her Niece, who by complements and presents he had won to his party, & she furthered his suit with his Mistress: and sometimes delivered his letters.

Together they planned an elopement. On November 9, Frances left the New House ostensibly to go for a walk with a maidservant and two elderly gentlemen of the household, but in fact to jump into Whitelocke's coach, get married secretly in his private chapel at Fawley Court, and escape with him to London for a honeymoon at the Ship Inn in Fleet Street….

….His Mistress was alike engaged, & distasted with the proceedings of her friends & they layd & contrived their designes of effecting their honest & just intentions, & God was pleased to blesse them in it. He went att Michaelmas terme to London, whither the antient gentlewoman was comes from Hambleden, & by her, Whitelocke had opportunity without suspitions to send to his Mistress & to contrive their meeting, & about Allhollantide[11], by appointment, Whitelocke & the antient gentlewoman came late over night to Fawley Court, & the next morning early, he and 6 gentlemen his trusty friends whom he brought down with him went in the Coach neere to the place where the appointment was to meet with Mistress Willoughby, being a field not far from Hambleden house, whither she used often to walke to take the aier[12]. By the way he left his friends, & att the place happily he met this Mistress with a maide & 2 of her Aunt's gentlemen waiting on her.

After salutations, Whitelocke told his Mistress that the weather was cold and bad for her to walke, & intreated her to make use of his Coach, she civilly accepted, butt when he was leading her to it, the gentlemen suspecting somewhat began to bustle & came up to him to take her from him, he layd his hand on his sword[13] & told them it would not be easy to take his Mistress out of his hand, that he should first part with his life, that they intended nothing butt was lawful & honourable & he

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11 A variant of All Hallowstide, a period which begins on 31 October.

12 Probably Whitelocke left the carriage in what we now call Dairy Lane (formerly Mill End Lane) and Frances came along 'Lady's Walk', the footpath through or just below Great Wood which would have afforded some privacy.

13 Interesting that he should wear a sword for his elopement!

desired them to acquaint their Lady therewith, & that they hoped ere long to waite on her gain, & nothing could prevent their just and honest designes, & for the gentlemen, if they loved their lives , he prayed them to be quiet & to present his humble service to their Lady.

They finding it in vain to struggle any further, Whitelocke brought away his mistress in his Coach, tooke up his friends where he had left them, & came away not slowly to Fawley Court carrying this rich treasure with him, there her kinswoman was to attend upon her. He caused his gates to be shut, & they went presently into the Chappell, where the Parson of Fawley[14], being ready, they were marryed, & after a short breakfast they took Coach & drove apace to London to hansom lodgings near the Temple, whither divers of their friends came to them, and rejoyced with them.

Within a short time, they were welcomed back to Hambleden….

….They went to Fawley Court before Christmas where their neighbours & friends & tenants were wellcome to them, some of her relations did them the favour to visit them, & the Countess of Sunderland admitted them to her house with all respect.

It truly was a love match, for when he returned to Fawley Court from attending the Oxford Assizes, he recorded….

….After this first journey which he had bin from his wife, att his coming home, she mett him leaping for joy at his safe return, as she did att all times after, & they had the great blessing of the height of those joys & comforts which true love affordes in Conjugall society, and what God was pleased to deny in the former[15], his goodness did fully supply in this time with advantage.[16]

The marriage lasted for fourteen and a half years, during which time they had nine children.

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[14] Rev William Kitson.

[15] His first wife had been very neurotic, and their sex life had been a disaster. They did, however, manage one son.

[16] Whitelocke's candour about his love life reveals him as a passionate man, free from the prudery which was to afflict later Puritans.

Henley in Edwardian Times: The General Election of 1906

Michael Redley

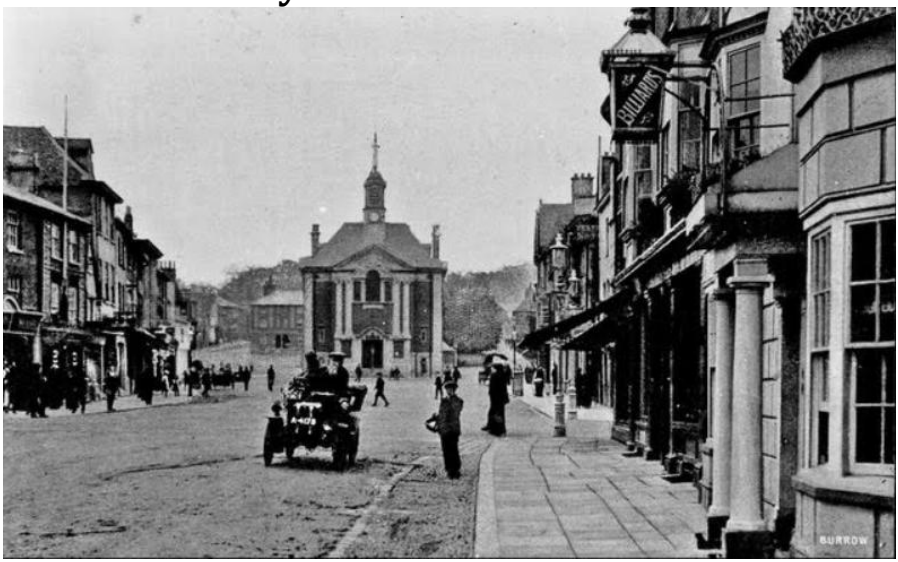

Figure 1: Henley Town Hall around the time of the Election in 1906. Photo credit John Pither.

On the day of the General Election in 1906, Monday 22 January, imagine yourself in the Market Place in Henley, in front of the fine new Town Hall opened only five years earlier. It's a bright sunny morning, and a large crowd has gathered to take in the atmosphere. There is a feeling in the air that something unusual is about to happen. General elections then were held over a two-week period, with different parts of the country voting on different days. The Liberals had already made spectacular gains in some of the early results, so that even the Prime Minister in the Conservative government which had just resigned, Arthur Balfour, had lost his seat in Manchester.

Would Henley go the same way? The Henley seat was held for the Conservative Party by a popular local grandee, Robert Hermon-Hodge of Wyfold Court. At two previous elections, in 1900 and 1895, he had defeated the energetic ambitious young Liberal, Herbert Samuel, although by a

declining margin each time. Now he faced a new challenger, Philip Morrell of the Oxfordshire brewing family. Morrell's wife was Ottoline, a flamboyant and glamorous socialite associated with the Bloomsburg Group who closely supported her husband's campaign. Townsfolk paraded around wearing rosettes in Liberal red and Conservatives blue. The crowd was entertained by sandwich men hired in from outside the town wearing costumes. A leading Liberal, who looked as though he had escaped from a circus, drove around the town with horses decorated in Liberal colours. The Conservatives paraded a skiff on a trolley festooned with their messages. Boats on wheels were a general feature of elections in Henley. The police, reinforced by drafts from outside in case of trouble, were especially wary of boats because they could be broken up and instantly turned into a bonfire which the Corporation seems to have been particularly nervous about. A Mr Whiting entertained the crowds dressed up as one of the leading Conservative politicians, Mr Joseph Chamberlain, attired in top hat and frock coat etc. "The monocle and orchid", said the newspaper report, "completed a startling resemblance to the great Birmingham politician".

The town was plastered with what the *Henley Standard* called 'mural literature', much of it produced locally in the political clubs. One message which appeared widely across the constituency was "More work and better wages for the working man, and less cost of living". It was accompanied by a little leaflet expressing the same sentiments. Philip Morrell described it at one of his political meetings as 'a sort of first-class ticket to paradise', whereupon from the back of the hall someone shouted out – 'let's have a return'. A reporter for one of the Reading newspapers noted down the messages on the walls in Caversham. One read:

> *" To Trade Unionists - you have fought for good wages and reasonable hours; fight also against being undercut by the producers of foreign sweated labour. Free imports and trade unionism are inconsistent".*

Many were much shorter, like this one: "Vote for Hermon-Hodge, a South Oxfordshire man for South Oxford", a dig at Morrell, who lived in London and had taken as a temporary home in the constituency, a house called "Sherwood", where Sherwood Gardens now is, up Greys Road just beyond the Gainsborough estate. The Conservative tried to brand Morrell a carpet bagger.The Liberals used poetry on their posters, but it might have been better if they hadn't. Here are two of them:

"Of Tory muddles we are sick
So make PM your MP quick"

...and

"Of putting taxes on your food, Hodge says he's not afraid'
Are you? Then vote for Morrell, for Progress and Free Trade".

There were plenty of comings and goings to watch. The polls in Henley opened at 8, and there was an early morning rush of voters on their way to the station from the town's new South Ward, where villas were already starting to snake up St Marks and St Andrews Roads; and again, just before the polls closed at 8 in the evening. There was a steadier pattern of voting throughout the day from the Newtown area, left and right along the Reading Road out past the station. In the North Ward, covering the old town centre - North End, West Hill, Gravel Hill, King's Road and Greys Road, as well as Bell, Duke, Hart and New Streets where many of the town's less affluent people lived, no votes were cast until late morning, although there was a steady rise in the number of people coming to the polls from that point until the end of the day. A fifth of those who voted in Henley came into the town from the outlying rural parishes of Rotherfield Greys, Peppard, Harpsden and Badgemore. A continuous procession of horse-drawn carriages about equal in number with motor cars, all of them lent by wealthy supporters who were named in great long lists in the local press and showing the favours of the parties, delivered electors to the steps of the town hall. As each one passed, it got a cheer from supporters in the crowd.

The motor car had developed into a major factor in local politics. In 1906 an average of about two hundred cars passed through the town of Henley on Sundays in the summer. The Corporation held an enquiry into the possibility of imposing a speed limit to deal with the sharp turns in the town, for example between Hart Street and Bell Street, and the dangers to civilians crossing the road. Mr Arthur Butler, a china and glass merchant, of 33, Duke Street, gave evidence saying that he had been knocked down by a car coming at high speed round the Hart Street corner. The driver stopped the car, tossed him half a crown as he lay on the road and then drove off. He said he had no idea how fast the car was travelling, but it was much too fast. Mr Charles Barnett of Hambleden, an enthusiastic motorist, said that he thought a town like Henley, which throve on visitors from outside, should not drive them away with 'grandmotherly legislation'. The

whole idea of a speed limit of 10 mile an hour was, he said, ‘a lot of rot’. Even horse-drawn carriages travelled at 14 miles an hour. All witnesses - townspeople and motorists alike - agreed that the most dangerous turning in the town by the Angel public house on the bridge. Cars racing for the 8.58 train did a sharp left turn at high speed. One witness said he'd no idea why the tyres didn't come off. Anyway, both candidates used motor cars for their canvassing for the first time, and held meetings in every village, some of whose inhabitants, though eligible to vote, had never previously done so.

But under the franchise then operating, only a quarter of the adult population in South Oxfordshire had the vote. Much of this was accounted for by the exclusion of women, although in 1906 a woman living in Caversham, Miss Evelin Holdstock of South View Avenue, got on to register owing to the unusual spelling of her name. She was Evelin with an "i", and those responsible had not spotted that she was a woman. Being on the register she had a right to vote. A small crowd gathered to watch her doing it. She arrived in Mr Hermon-Hodge's own car and posed rather grandly for photographs as she left the polling station. Evelin's story made the national news, where it was reported that there were only three such cases nationally. The exceptions proved the rule, that this really was a male-only franchise.

Some adult men were also disqualified. It was a “householder franchise”, under which freeholders were guaranteed a vote, although in Henley in 1900 there had been only 197 freehold voters out of an electorate of 1,550. Most people lived in rented accommodation, but could only vote if they lived in “.....a dwelling house, or portion of a dwelling house defined as a separate dwelling”. So, tenants were disqualified if their landlords lived on the premises. Lodgers could vote, although lodging had to be worth more than a certain amount, be unfurnished, and have been occupied by the person for over a year. There were only 38 of them on the electoral roll in Henley in 1900. But male domestic servants living with their employers didn't have the vote; nor did sons of whatever age living with their parents; nor soldiers or policemen living in barracks; nor people in receipt of poor relief. To be included on the register, you had to apply. It was one of the functions of the political parties' agents to get as many of “their” supporters registered as possible. But the register didn’t come into effect until six months after it was completed, so you could have registered but

still not have a vote on the day. The electorate for the whole of South Oxfordshire in 1906 was only 8,500 people, or just under half of the adult male population.

Henley, with its political clubs, the Salisbury Club in Queen Street and the new Liberal Club on the Reading Road, was the political centre of the South Oxfordshire constituency. It certainly saw itself that way, with its Regatta giving it the aura of a centre of national and even international significance, and the new Town Hall asserting a certain dominance over lesser centres in the constituency. But even with the nearby rural parishes included, Henley contained in 1906 only about 15 percent of the constituency's population. Of the rest another 30 percent or so were in three other sizeable towns, Caversham (still then in Oxfordshire), Watlington and Thame. Caversham had grown by 1906, with a population already more than twice the size of Henley's. By the First World War, to Henley's evident relief, Caversham was transferred to be part of the Borough constituency of Reading. In 1906 there was uneasy rivalry, with Caversham drawing a lot of attention because of its size and importance to the vote, whereas Henley clung proudly to its position as the political epicentre.

But over half the population of the constituency still lived then in almost ninety villages and hamlets across South Oxfordshire. In 1906. There were twenty-four polling stations for the villages. At the previous election, Hermon-Hodge had complained at the travelling involved in canvassing even a small proportion of these tiny population centres. His rival, Herbert Samuel, had dealt with the problem by staying for periods in the cottages of supporters rather than travelling in and out. He had got to know many electors at first hand this way, and it seems to have helped him to win hearts and minds, although he found that the grip of traditional loyalties in the countryside remained strong.

It is interesting to note just how particular the settlement pattern of this part of Oxfordshire was in 1906 compared with the rest of the country. Not since 1850, before the industrial revolution had really taken hold, was the average proportion of Britain's population living in the countryside as opposed to towns as high as it still was in South Oxfordshire - 52 percent in 1911. Across the nation generally it had fallen by then to 22 percent. But Oxfordshire was catching up. Its rural population fell sharply between 1891 and 1901. In South Oxfordshire 13 of 22 its civil parishes showed a decrease

in population, with increases only in the south, close to railway. Overall, taking births into account, the county suffered net emigration of 22,000 in the ten years up to 1901, as men left to find work elsewhere. Rural depopulation had begun to slow down by the First World War, with only five parishes registering decreases at the census of 1911, although towns in Oxfordshire, including Henley, continued to grow, even if at a slower rate, at the expense of the countryside. The census returns of 1901 and 1911 show many of those living in New Town, working in the building trade or on the railways, had been born in small rural communities, not necessarily in Oxfordshire but across the country, and were first generation immigrants to the towns.

What about employment? The census for 1911 shows that by far the largest source of male employment in Oxfordshire as a whole was still agricultural work, with building work a long way behind, and, not surprisingly with a dispersed population, transportation of people and goods. These three together accounted for over half of all male employment. Only six percent of the workforce was in industrial manufacturing, much less than in services, including shop keeping, and the sale of food, drink and lodgings. Henley, with 49 licensing premises concentrated in the old town, with Brakspear's brewery at its centre, made this a speciality. Licensing sessions of Henley Borough Bench, chaired by the Mayor, tried to contain the number of outlets for drink, although the Conservative government elected in 1900 had introduced the principle of compensation for publicans and breweries whose premises were closed down for social reasons. The right to compensation was administered by a higher court in Oxford, which also determined whether houses were licenced. This was one example of many where central government was starting to assume functions, also in education and the provision and maintenance of roads, which had previously been the responsibility of local government. Certainly, the politically charged atmosphere which had surrounded licensing issues in Henley in Victorian times - between the breweries and the churches - was much reduced by 1906.

But these exchange at a Licensing Session in 1905, about a beer house called the Red Lion which then existed on West Hill, show that social tensions still existed around drink. Called to give evidence, the Borough Surveyor, Mr Pratt described the local layout.

"The Red Lion was 55 feet from the Red Cow beer house. The Row Barge was 75 feet distant on the opposite side of the road, and was a fully licensed house. The Victoria was 438 feet away and the King's Arms 522 feet....it would be no hard thing if the licence were not renewed. It was the same beer at the Row Barge and the Red Lion. It was rather a rowdy neighbourhood."

The pros- and cons- of shutting the Red Lion down were then discussed. The transient population of labourers who came to Henley looking for work was accommodated in lodging houses on West Hill, and, against closing the Red Lion, the point was made that giving the lodgers the means to drink in houses '…catering for the particular class in which they happened to be centred' would prevent them drifting down the hill to the more respectable houses in Market Place. The police chief of the town said that West Hill 'was certainly not a pleasure resort', someone adding: 'It is not our West End!' It was, perhaps, no coincidence that the police station of the town then stood between the lodgers up West Hill and the Market Place at centre of the town.

Social tensions were part of the background to the general election of 1906, for behind the rural depopulation were many tales of hardship. With the town growing rapidly there had hitherto been plenty of work for those who wanted it, notably in the building trade. One of the town's foremost builders, Charles Clements, a notable Liberal, described at a political meeting how wages in building in the town had risen rapidly over the last thirty years, from 10/- when he began as an apprentice to over 40/- today. But in the middle of 1905, there was suddenly a sharp rise in the number of able-bodied and willing local men unable to find work at any price. The Mayor at the end of 1905, Alderman Simmons, established an emergency relief committee to raise funds and distribute them for the poor in the town. It emerged that significant numbers of the town's children attending its primary schools, for example at the end of Norman Avenue and on Gravel Hill, were underfed due to their parents' poverty. It was decided that a soup kitchen would be indiscriminate, helping "scallywags" as well as the deserving poor. Instead, charitable workers who knew the community from the inside were to give tickets to deserving families which provided credit with shops in the town.

At the other end of the spectrum, however, were the very rich who chose to live locally, bringing enormous wealth into the community from the City, business and the law. Their Victorian piles - there were about twenty of

them within seven or eight miles of the town - helped to underpin the local economy with huge building projects, the direct employment they provided for indoor and outdoor servants, their patronage of local tradesmen and the extent of their charitable giving. In 1907 town worthies and the rich in local society gathered in the town hall to honour the greatest of them, Frank Crisp, the fabulously wealthy City solicitor and deal maker, who by around 1900 had spent the equivalent of £15 million in today's money on creating his fantasy Friar Park estate at the top of - of all places - West Hill in Henley. Much of it had flowed to local tradesmen and suppliers. Crisp had also given large sums for the rebuilding of the United Reform Church at the other end of the town, supplying it with the lanterned clock tower which graces Henley's skyline to this day. Crisp's generosity towards local causes was legendary. Every civic event of note in the town hall was accompanied by magnificent displays of flowers from the glass houses of Friar Park.

Indeed the Town Hall itself could not have been built without very large private donations - the biggest by Viscount Hambleden, owner of the W.H.Smiths, the stationary and news agency empire, who lived at Greenlands, now the Henley Management College. On the day of its grand opening, 13 March 1901, shop keepers were asked to close their premises from noon so that townsfolk could witness the event. Viscount Hambleden was supposed to cut the ribbon himself, although he cried off at the last-minute owing to illness in the family, and the ceremony was performed instead by Hermon-Hodge, who had only five minutes' notice to get his speech together. He did well, although, perhaps not surprisingly, he fell back on Tory dogma to see him through. He said -

> *'This Town Hall is an instance of the advantages of having men of great wealth, legitimately made in the commerce of the country, living in the neighbourhood. If we were all equal we should find all would be poor, and we should not be able to avail ourselves of such a magnificent example of public benefaction as Mr Smith has shown... which has enabled the people of Henley to meet today in this beautiful, imposing building.'*

Most of these local 'men of great wealth' - Crisp included - were staunch Liberals. Crisp had also given towards the creation of the Liberal Club in the Reading Road. A few were Conservatives. A cousin of Philip Morrell, George Morrell, on the brewing side of the family, had been Conservative Member of Parliament for the neighbouring seat of Mid-Oxfordshire, in the

1890s. In 1906 he lost his seat, just as Philip, standing as a Liberal, won his. The two were not on speaking terms. The Conservative candidate, Hermon-Hodge, was more of the county hunting type, a freemason and part-time soldier with the local militia, the Queen's Own Oxfordshire Hussars. But he, too, had roots in trade. His seat at Wyfold Court at been built out of the profits of cotton mills.

Figure 2: Ottoline Morrel, 1902. Photo credit: Wikipedia

Henley in Edwardian times drew heavily on this 'new money'. In fact, the only hint of 'old money' was provided by Philip Morrell's wife, Ottoline. She was a Cavendish Bentinck, Dukes of Portland, one of the greatest Whig landowning families with extensive estates in Nottinghamshire which had ruled Britain since the late seventeenth century. Ottoline was a really striking figure, much drawn, painted, not always flatteringly, photographed and written about by some of the greatest artists, literary figures and diarists of her time. She and Philip married in February 1902, when she was 29 and he 22. Her family thought she had married beneath her, although at least the law was a respectable profession. Before she

married she had had an affair with a much older man, the lawyer and Liberal politician, Herbert Asquith. Throughout her life she attracted the attention of men drawn to what one of them - the painter Duncan Grant - called her "singular moral and physical courage", and - said the poet, T.S.Eliot - her ability to "create the idea of an achievable good". Bored by the law, Philip wanted an occupation giving him independence, and Ottoline sent him to see Asquith, then a rising star in the party. It was obviously helpful for the Liberal cause to have a Morrell stand in Oxfordshire, where they had hitherto represented Conservatism, and where the brewing interests of Henley had always been stalwarts of their opponents. Archibald Brakspear had been President of the South Oxfordshire Conservatives for years before the General Election of 1906. So the Liberals offered Philip the chance to contest the seat which had just been vacated by Herbert Samuel. Together, the Morrells set energetically to work, visiting the villages and holding meetings in the towns, to win what, frankly, seemed unwinnable.

For Philip, who applied himself seriously to politics though much overshadowed by Ottoline, his wife was his secret weapon. Always at his side at political meetings, she often said a few passionate words in his support, and held meetings with women where she urged them to put pressure on their menfolk to vote for progress in social matters which the Liberals represented. She was particularly persuasive in the small villages where deference to the old ways remained strong. At the victory celebrations, the Liberal agent praised Ottoline, who, he said,

> *"…. had inspired hundreds and perhaps thousands of humble men in the villages to take their part in the election. It was not always easy for them ... but in face of all difficulties, they had come forward because they had felt they were fighting to win."*

That has the authentic ring of the inspiring Ottoline. Joshua Watts, a leading Liberal in the town who had a tailoring, hatter and outfitters business at No 12, Bell Street, added his thanks to her, "not, he said, as a lady of title but as a good woman."

What were the issues at the election in Henley? Predominantly they were the same as in the election nationally, although with a local twist. It was accepted that Britain's share of world trade was declining. 'Free trade', the principle of goods passing across international frontiers without taxes, had

been abandoned by Britain's main trading rivals, particularly the United States and the coming power in Europe, Germany, unified by Bismarck in the 1870s. The complaint was that while British goods faced tariffs everywhere abroad, Britain's markets remained open to foreign imports. Each week the *Henley Standard* at that time carried a cartoon, syndicated nationally, which repeated the same point. It was said that changes in world trade were the underlying cause of the unemployment, nationally and in the town.

The same factors were also believed to explain why significant numbers of Henley people were emigrating, particularly at this time for Canada. In October 1905, the *Standard* reported that Harry Sergeant, a well-known Henley figure who had stroked a Leander boat, had departed from Liverpool with the monthly contingent from Reading. Everyone knew someone who was leaving for a new life elsewhere. In 1903, Joseph Chamberlain, the leading Conservative represented by Mr Whiting with the monocle and the orchid in Market Place, had launched a crusade to do something about this. He proposed that Britain and its Empire should also abandon 'free trade' and impose a permanent external tariff barrier around its industries and agriculture, with free trade only within the empire and protection from imports from outside. This, it was said, would prevent jobs being lost abroad and deal with unemployment at home. Although not all Conservatives supported Chamberlain, many in the party thought this was the way ahead. Their leader, Arthur Balfour, attempted a compromise, that Britain should only have tariff barriers with countries which imposed them against its trade - so called retaliatory tariffs.

Hermon-Hodge stood for this more moderate position. He argued at his meetings throughout the constituency that what he called "fiscal reform" - abandoning free trade for retaliatory practices against foreigners trading unfairly with Britain - was the only real issue facing the electors. The Conservative campaign in Caversham mounted on a truck a couple of wooden doors which were made in Sweden and drew them around the town, followed by men distributing bills setting out the Liberal's position on trade and its consequences. As the *Henley Standard* put it, carpenters in South Oxfordshire were

> *'....without employment leaving their poor wives and children at home starving while foreign doors and window frames and other kinds of ready-made joinery*

are coming into the district in wagon loads for which English money goes to pay foreign workers and Englishmen are starving'..

The point was reinforced at Conservative meetings in halls used particularly by working people, for example Victoria Hall on Greys Hill in Henley, with entertainments to attract their attendance, aiming to whip up anger among working people about foreigners taking their jobs. Archibald Brakspear warmed up the audience at one of these meetings by asking whether they were or were not satisfied with the working of the Labour market of this country (Voice: "no we're not")

'Were they content to know that there were thousands of men out of work, in Henley, and all over the country, who were willing to work? Were they content that the children and wives of working men had nothing to eat? Were they satisfied that nothing was wrong when they knew that children went to school, aye in Henley, half starved, and therefore not in a fit state to undertake their duties in School?'

In his published election address Hermon-Hodge said: 'My policy is free trade throughout our empire and fair trade with those who will trade 'fair' with us.'

But the Conservative campaign nationally had started on the back foot. The party was split over Chamberlain's protectionist policy, and influential individuals within it continued to advocate free trade. Hermon-Hodge tried to dodge the question whether Chamberlain's plan - a tariff of 2/- a quarter on wheat imported from outside the empire, 5 percent on meat and 10 percent on other goods, - was Conservative policy or not. When he tried to suggest that there was really no difference between Chamberlain, foraging out in front of the main army, and Balfour leading its main body, Morrell responded that Hermon-Hodge was reconciled to a rise in the cost of living - and in particular a rise in the price of bread, which was the inevitable consequence of not being able to buy grain from the cheapest sources around the world.

The arguments were technical. Very few people really followed the details. But Councillor Clements told a Liberal meeting that experience since free trade was established with abolition of the Corn Laws in the middle of the last century showed that the standard of living of ordinary people would fall under protection. Mr Wormald, an industrialist, made a weighty speech to a huge audience at the Corn Exchange in Wallingford explaining

how tariffs would increase rather than reduce unemployment, and Morrell read the key passage from Wormald's speech to his meetings in South Oxfordshire; and the Liberal Party opened a 'free trade shop' in the town during the election campaign to show with specific examples how the prices of particular goods would be higher under protection than under free trade. The *Henley Standard* called it '..a lying exhibition to mislead the working class'. Hermon-Hodge insisted that he would never support any policy to increase the cost of bread. But the Liberals came out of the election debate as "the party of the big loaf", and the Conservative of "the little loaf".

Herbert Asquith, Chancellor the Exchequer-designate in the Liberal government, which was about to be formed, addressed a large crowd at a Liberal rally in the Town Hall in Henley only days before the poll, saying that the reaction against Chamberlain's protectionism explained the great tide of support for Liberalism sweeping the country. It almost certainly did affect the outcome in Henley.

Herman-Hodge may have swung a few working class votes his way in Henley and Caversham on the grounds that coping with a higher cost of living when employed was better than not being able to get job to start with. But his campaign for fiscal reform seems to have made little appeal in the countryside. Having jobs, albeit in a declining industry close to the margins of subsistence, made farm labourers highly sensitive to any suggestion that costs of living might rise. Garsington and Littlemore, both at the Oxford end of the constituency, were said to have been particularly staunch in the Liberal cause. The middle class of Henley and Caversham, which had a strong Liberal streak in any case, had satisfaction in voting for Morrell of also standing up for the traditional way of doing things. Chamberlain's protectionism made the Conservatives - throwing the old policy out in favour of something new - the radicals, while the Liberals - defending the established way of doing things - stood for tradition.

Two other local factors which may also have helped to tip the South Oxfordshire constituency towards Liberalism in 1906, to do with faith and memories of the Boer War which were particularly raw in the constituency. Much was made at election meetings in South Oxfordshire, in the countryside as well as the towns, of the Education Act which the Conservative government had enacted in 1902. This gave the Education Committees of County Councils the right to recover through local rates the cost of improving elementary education at the local level. But control

locally was often in the hands of the Anglican parson; and teachers in elementary schools had to undergo a faith test to be confirmed in their jobs. The non-conformist churches had grown in numbers and influence at the expense of Anglicanism in the second half of the nineteenth century. In the communities of South Oxfordshire, as many as a third of the population worshipped in chapels and meeting houses rather than in the local parish church. For the non-conformist churches, the Education Act seemed a form of coercion in favour of the established church from which they were determined to escape. In Henley, a group of prominent townsmen led by Joshua Watts, the outfitter in Bell Street, made public declarations when they were arraigned for non-payment of local rates as non-conformists, refusing to accept the principal on grounds of conscience. Watts had been Henley's Mayor in the mid-1890s.

The "squabbles over education on religious grounds" were described by Hermon-Hodge at a Conservative Meeting at Shiplake as the work of 'extreme men' who were setting the public an unfortunate example by breaking the law. He maintained that whatever the appearance of things when the Education Act was passed, experience showed that non-conformists had 'the same privileges, powers and grants of money in the management of their schools as churchmen'. But Morrell's promise to the non-conformist community - that the Liberal Party would see 'that education was controlled by those who paid for it, and that religious tests were abolished in the case of teachers in publicly provided schools' - undoubtedly carried some weight with this large segment of the popular vote.

The war in South Africa involved numbers of men from Henley and its surrounding villages, A dozen or so didn't come back, and many more were wounded or invalided out with tropical diseases. The issue had been highly controversial locally, and the arguments rumbled on in the election. The Liberals complained that the extra taxation on firms and businesses to pay for what they regarded as an unnecessary war was the primary cause of the unemployment which the Conservatives were attributing to free trade. The Liberals successfully dramatised the issue with a new allegation - that the Conservative government's use of imported Chinese labourers to get the mines of Johannesburg working again was modern day slavery. Hermon-Hodge replied that it was a perfectly sensible arrangement - the Chinese workers were volunteers, well paid, and not in any way displacing

white workers, who would not in any case do the work the Chinese were doing. A letter in the local press by Margaret Phillimore, recently returned from South Africa, supporting Hermon-Hodge's position was contradicted by her brother, a High Court judge, Sir Robert Phillimore, who had previously contested the constituency for the Liberals. The text of his denunciation was printed in a poster which appeared across the constituency. Morrell argued that Chinese labour showed that the Conservatives had not abandoned the barbarism which had characterised their conduct of the war. The Liberal Party would repatriate the Chinese labourers at the earliest opportunity. It is hard to know for sure. But it seems likely that the cry of 'Chinese slavery', heard across the country but reawakening old wounds about the war in South Oxfordshire, added extra impetus to the Liberal cause there.

The count for South Oxfordshire took place at the County Hall in Oxford, and the result reached Henley over the lunch break on 23 January when there were few people on the streets of the town. But quickly whoops of joy, shouts of "Victory" and "Good Old Morrell" could be heard as people caught up with the news. From the Liberal Club, the result was rushed by Mr Crisp personally to the party's Committee rooms which were in the Market Place, where the numbers were posted for the avoidance of doubt, as follows:

		Votes cast	Majority	Turnout (%)	Swing
1906	Morrell (Liberal)	4,562	512		+4.2
	Hermon-Hodge (Conservative)	4,050		87.6	

The swing of over 4 percent, together with an increased turnout of over twenty percent gave Morrell a convincing win. The *Henley Standard* pointed out at the time that a 'Radical' – meaning a Liberal - had never won Henley before. And not until 2024 did it happen again. Even in the Labour landslide at the end of the Second World War, when Clement Attlee's Labour government came to power and the number of Conservative

members in the Commons was halved, the Conservative Party hung on to Henley with a majority of nearly 3,000 votes. When news of Morrell's victory reached the Liberal Club in Henley, Frank Crisp was heard to say: "We have striven for twenty years to accomplish his, and now we have it. All I can say now is 'Hurrah'". The Conservatives on the other hand told themselves that they were not to be despondent. Leaving the count, Hermon-Hodge said to his agent that he was not to blame himself for the defeat. It was impossible, he said, "to swim up Niagara".

At the Salisbury Club in Queen Street, the news brought utter despondency. But local activists still carried the Conservative agent, Mr Joel, shoulder high into the club. He explained that Hermon-Hodge had gone straight home, knocked up by the defeat and would not be putting in an appearance. There was no one cause for what had happened, he Joel. Losses to the Liberals had occurred all over. But the principal problem was the difficulty of putting over the advantages of tariffs in the rural areas. A prominent local Conservative, the Lord of the Manor, William Mackenzie of Henley Park confirmed this, saying

'Fiscal reform was too far above the heads of many of the agricultural labourers who thought of nothing else but 'the big loaf', and left out of account the question of the general prosperity of the country'.

Complaints about 'Liberal lies' rumbled on in the local press for some weeks afterwards. It was said that at some meetings in the villages, Morrell had promised free land to the agricultural workers, although no evidence for this was ever produced. The gloomiest predictions had given Morrell a majority of over a 1,000, and the Conservative quickly realised that it might all have been much worse.

The motor car carrying Philip and Ottoline reached Henley about 7.30 in the evening. It was brought a halt at the corner of Harpsden Lane on the Reading Road by a large cheering crowd, who transferred the couple to an open landau which was pulled by a score of lads to the steps of the Town Hall. There Philip made a short speech. Amid the buzz of excited voices very few heard what he said, but it was something to the effect that the Tories had said the Liberals would never win that seat, 'but they knew better now'. The crowd sang 'For he's a jolly good fellow', and then torches were lit, and the crowd, followed by Frank Crisp and his wife in their carriage, set off on a triumphal tour of the town finishing up at the Liberal

Club on the Reading Road. There, Philip made another speech from the balcony to the crowd on the street below, while in the reading room Lady Ottoline was presented by a number of ladies with a handsome bouquet of scarlet tulips and other flowers. This was followed by serious political self-congratulation in the billiard room. Mr Crisp said that the Liberals in the town '...had been looked upon almost as the scum of the earth, but they had won the seat and now they must take care to keep it.' The day ended with the Morrells pulled up Greys Road to their lodging.

A few days after the election, as the town's chief magistrate the Mayor of Henley congratulated the public for their conduct during the election. Not a single breach of the peace could be attributed to its proceedings, which was more than could said of other places. It was reported from Slough, for example, that people were so elated at the Liberal victory that they sang the doxology in the streets. In Wycombe, after the polls closed, a crowd smashed the windows of the Conservative Committee rooms, and then turned on the police who tried to prevent it. The same mob then went on to break the windows of several private houses. At least decorum had been preserved in Henley.

Had anything really changed? The next general election in 1910 suggested not. Then, a popular young Conservative, Valentine Fleming of Joyce Grove in Nettlebed, won the seat back from the Liberals with an even higher turnout and a massive swing in his favour:

		Votes cast	Majority	Turnout (%)	Swing
1910	Valentine Fleming (Conservative)	5,649	1,603		+11.3
	Philip Morrell (Liberal)	4.046		92.0	

But what the election did show was how a new political world was emerging, so that what Henley people wanted could not necessarily be secured through Parliamentary representation alone. Amid celebrations for Morrell's victory at the Liberal Club in the town, the Liberal agent, Mr

Bransby, said that they must now work hard to get Liberals on to Oxfordshire's County Council. Strong feelings had been expressed about education policy in South Oxfordshire, he said, but it would be no use the Liberal Party nationally amending the Education Act if the administration of local affairs was not in '…the hands of the right people'. Amid this greater complexity, popular democracy was not going to lead to the inevitable triumph of progressive causes which many hoped for or feared.

Nettlebed military camps in the Second World War

Paul Butler

The existence of a twentieth-century British military camp at Nettlebed predates the start of the Second World War. In the early part of the century, it is likely that the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry Regiment used it as a military training location, although specific references to this effect have not been found. The first reliable record of an active camp dates from September 1927, when the British territorial army occupied the site as part of their annual two-week training devoted to army manoeuvres.[17] That year, under Aldershot Command, thousands of troops were spread over various tented and hutted encampment areas at Nettlebed, Whitchurch, Wallingford, and Didcot, and the military exercises culminated in a staged battle to control the bridge over the Thames at Wallingford.[18] Troops at Nettlebed included the Seaforth Highlanders, the East Yorkshire Regiment, the Royal Ulster Rifles, and the 2nd Battalion of the Royal Lincolnshire Regiment.[19,20]

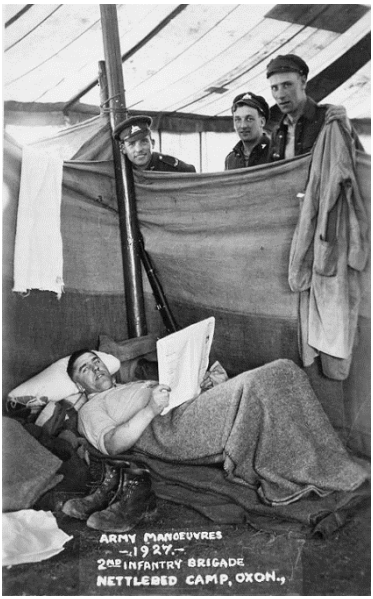

Figure 1: Soldiers of the 2nd Infantry Battalion of the Royal Lincolnshire Regiment relax at Nettlebed Camp during army manoeuvres in 1927.

With the start of the Second World War in September 1939, the site was consolidated and used for training and as a staging post for troop

[17] Francis, P. and Crisp, G. *Military Command and Control Organisation, Volume 5, Appendices*, English Heritage, 2008, p. 53.
[18] 'Lincolns in Mimic War', *Retford and Worksop Herald and North Notts Advertiser*, 13 September 1927, p. 4.
[19] 'Flooded Camps', *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 16 September 1927, p. 4.
[20] www.worthpoint.com/worthopedia/lincolnshire-regiment-soldiers-tent-1772642947.

movements, but it also had an important strategic purpose. From June 1940, in response to German bombers heading to areas like Coventry, the camp had a dedicated area to the north of the High Street with a searchlight battery, several Army huts and ordnance storage buildings, and anti-aircraft gun emplacements. Joyce Carey, who was sent there in 1942, recalls, "I got posted to a village in Oxfordshire called Nettlebed, it had three public houses and a church - we had three buses a week which went into Henley-on-Thames - Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday but I could not afford the fare as I only received 15/- a week which in today's money is 75p. I worked in the operations room where we had to plot German aircraft when there was a raid and pass the plots over to our searchlight batteries and gun positions who hopefully shot the planes down."[21]

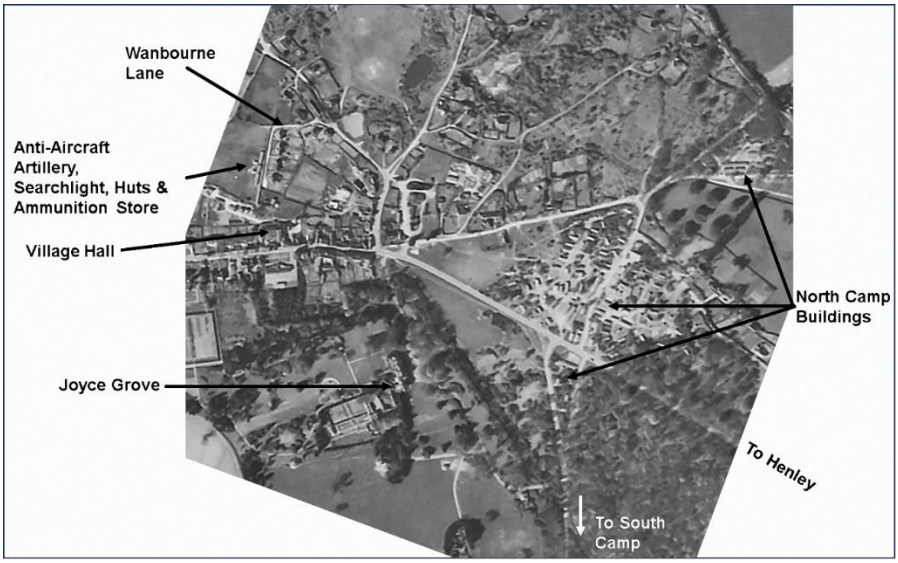

Figure 2: USAAF reconnaissance aerial image of Nettlebed showing the North Camp, taken 22 April 1944 (Credit: Historic England, Aerial Photo Explorer).

Things changed with the entry of the USA into the war in December 1941. The UK and US authorities made an agreement in May 1942 that Germany's defeat was the priority and it would be best achieved by a joint ground invasion launched from the UK into Northern Europe. For a successful assault it was calculated that more than a million US troops and

[21] J. Carey, 'Stripping down the 25 pounders' (BBC WW2 People's War Article A4291832).

their equipment would need to be shipped to the UK, and then made ready for an invasion, initially planned for May 1943.[22] Flowing from this decision was the necessity for the UK/US together to embark on a vast construction programme to build airfields, hospitals, quartermaster depots, warehouses for various Army services, and large semi-permanent camps to house the expected number of arriving American troops. The code name for this preparatory build-up phase was Operation Bolero and it would have a transformative effect on the camp at Nettlebed.

Spearheading the Bolero effort from the American side were the Engineer General Service Regiments of the US Army Corps of Engineers. These large regimental units, of up to a thousand men, consisted of regular army-trained officers together with enlisted men who had direct experience in engineering or construction work. The regiments would have access to all the necessary earth-moving, paving, and construction machinery available in Britain but with much shipped from the USA to a supply depot at Thatcham. Their role in the first months was to build base camps for the army ground forces, initially setup for tents and then replaced with semi-permanent Nissen huts. Supply depots and hospitals would follow. In view of the British weather, concrete walkways and hardstanding for vehicles were a desirable feature at all construction sites.

The regiments were the vanguard of many others to follow, including aviation construction battalions to build runways and airstrips. It was planned that after the invasion, code name Operation Overlord, the construction units would be part of the assault forces, tasked with closely following the front lines, repairing and reconstructing roads, railways, bridges and other infrastructure destroyed by the retreating Nazi forces.

Operation Bolero Begins

From May 1942 onwards, a steady stream of US military personnel, supplies, and equipment started to cross the Atlantic. For many, the first place in Europe that American soldiers set foot was Belfast, Northern Ireland; for others it was Gourock, Scotland. Almost all GIs that sailed had never left America before, let alone crossed the Atlantic, and the journey across left indelible memories of overcrowding, boredom, and incessant

[22] Beck A.M., Bortz A., Lynch C.W., Mayo L., and Weld R.F. *U.S. Army in World War II, The Technical Services, The Corps of Engineers: The War against Germany*, Center of Military History, United States Army, Washington, D.C. 1985, p.22-23.

seasickness. Some crossed in US troop carriers in convoy formation on a journey that lasted almost two weeks; others crossed at speed in around five days in the prestigious British Cunard liners *Queen Mary* and *Queen Elizabeth*, both converted to carry up to 15,000 troops from their normal 2,000 passenger capacities.[23] On the British ships, in the early stages of the war, one of the biggest shocks for the GIs was the food – described as sticky oatmeal in the morning and leathery mutton at night[24] – not that this mattered as the rough seas in the winter months and the constant zigzagging of the ships to avoid submarine attack took appetites away from everyone but the few with cast-iron constitutions.[25]

The Americans Arrive At Nettlebed

One of the earlier transatlantic crossings with American troops was made by the liner *SS Argentina*. She sailed from New York on 1 July 1942 as part of a convoy accompanied by several naval escorts, arriving at Gourock on 13 July. Around 8,000 troops were on board, including advance units from the Eighth Air Force, members of the 56th Signal Battalion, and the 343rd Engineer General Service Regiment, with a contingent of around 1,000 officers and enlisted men. The 343rd took an onward train journey south, and reached Nettlebed on 15 July. They moved into the camp close to the centre of the village and set up tents and occupied vacant buildings alongside members of the British air defence unit. An American GI, Armonde Casagrande, part of the Headquarters & Service section of the 343rd, recalled his first impressions, "The camp was complete with Mess Hall, office buildings and Nissen huts. The huts were used to house the personnel, they were constructed of sheet metal with a concrete base and furnished with plywood cots, and they accommodated 16 to 20 people. The Mess Hall was staffed with British personnel." He went on, "We were attached to the British Army and thereby under their command, which meant they also had to feed us. Mutton and liver were the main staples which caused many of us to head for Henley, a few miles away, for fish

[23] Harding, S. *Gray Ghost - The RMS Queen Mary at War,* Pictorial Histories Publishing Company, 1982, p. 26.
[24] Reynolds, D. *Rich Relations*, Phoenix Press, 2000, p. 242.
[25] On the *Queens*, the troops were more likely to receive ham and eggs for breakfast once the American Quartermaster Corps became involved.

and chips."[26] He also remembered that some of the troops staying at the camp would hunt and cook rabbits; another GI recollected that the Nettlebed natives thought initially that they were Australians.[27]

The first mission for the regiment was to increase the total accommodation of the Nettlebed Camp to over 1,000 by enlarging the existing camp and constructing a second camp about half-a-mile to the south, off the Highmoor road and close to where the Nettlebed sawmill is now; the two camps to be referred to as North Camp and South Camp respectively. With hundreds of experienced construction workers and engineers available, and a good supply of building materials, particularly structural timber,

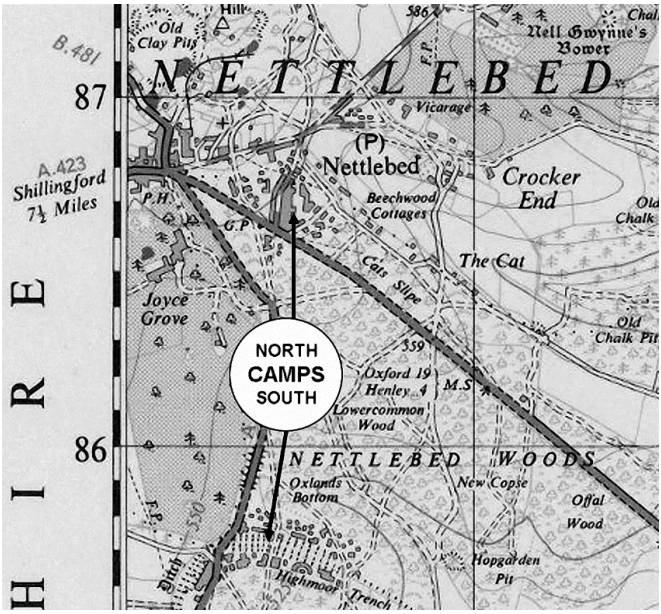

Figure 3: The 1:25,000 1948 Ordinance Survey map 41/78-A of the Nettlebed area, showing the North and South Camp locations. (Credit: National Library of Scotland).

[26] According to www.6thcorpscombatengineers.com/ArmondeCasagrande, Casagrande's lasting memory of Nettlebed was the food, recalling "The toughest part of Nettlebed was getting used to the British rations." However, by the time he left in December 1942, American troops were consuming imported American rations.

[27] Ibid, Reed Banks, 'My Thoughts About The Greatest Generation'.

within a couple of months a fully operational hutted South Camp had been built on the approximate 15-acre site.

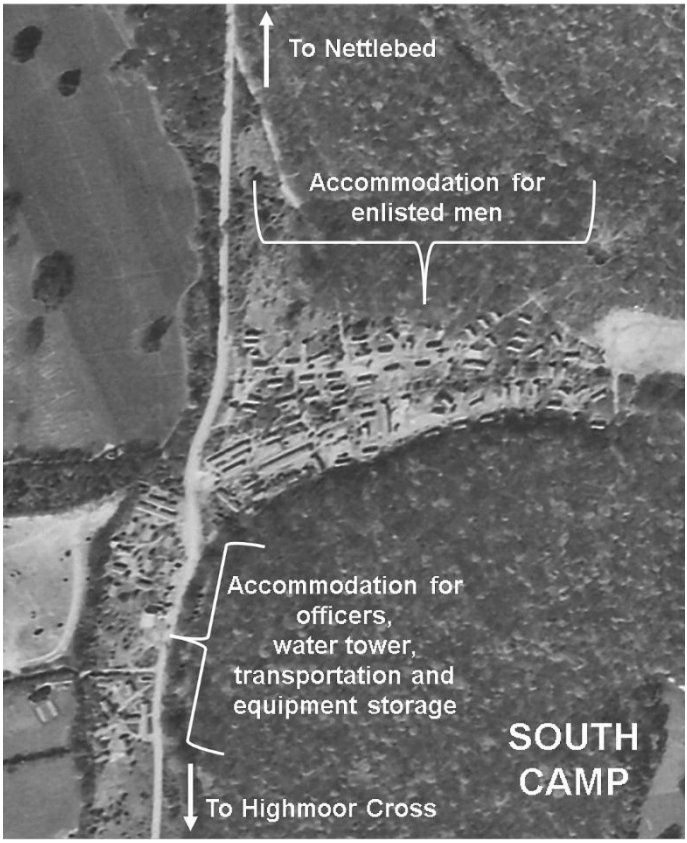

Figure 4: USAAF reconnaissance aerial image of Nettlebed showing the South Camp, taken 22 April 1944. (Credit: Historic England, Aerial Photo Explorer).

The aerial photograph of South Camp (Fig. 4) shows the camp layout in detail. There appears to be about 60 regular Nissen huts and 20 larger ones, allowing a rough estimate of camp size of around 600-men, given that a typical 1,000-man Nissen hut camp contained 120 buildings and covered

about 40 acres.[28] The enlisted men were accommodated to the east of Highmoor road and the officer's quarters, a concrete water tower, and motor vehicle pool and maintenance area to the west.[29] In addition, the company built a water treatment and sewerage plant in the woods mid-way between the two camps.

Construction regiments such the 343rd liked to have a bit of fun within the camps they built and often used signposts with fictitious names at street intersections through the camp, such as the example shown in Fig. 5.

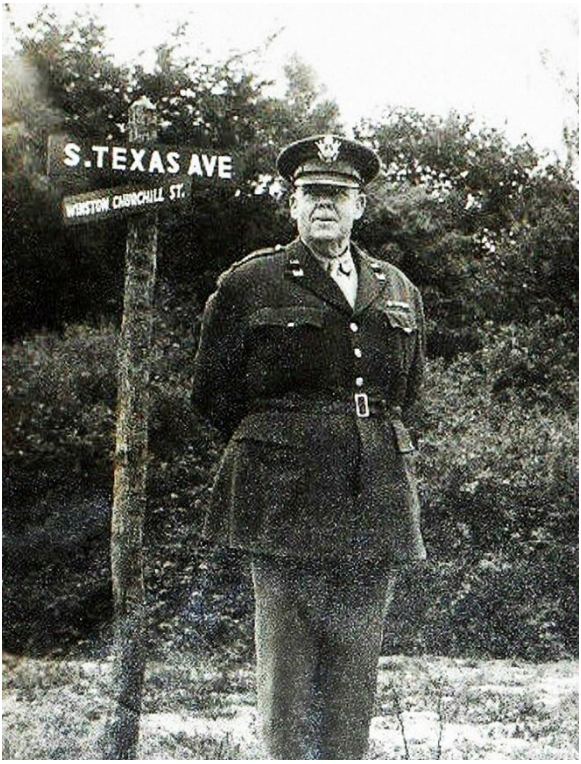

Figure 5: A 1942 press photograph of a US Army Colonel standing by a street intersection sign at a camp in England under construction by the Corps of Engineers.

[28] Ruppenthal, R.G. *U.S. Army in World War II, The European Theatre of Operations, Logistical Support of the Armies: May 1941-September 1944*, Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, Washington, D.C., 1953, p. 243.
[29] Sparrowhawk, Pat, personal communication.

Operation Torch

Throughout the first part of 1942, Bolero was in full flow and ground force, air force and support group movements to the UK proceeded as planned. By late June, the number of US military personnel in Britain stood at 54,845, predicted to rise to 242,000 by year end.[30] However, within another four weeks, the strategic direction of the war would be modified by the British and American chiefs placing Bolero on temporary hold in favour of an active military invasion along the French North African coast. This assault would be given the codename Operation Torch.

The plan called for a three-pronged landing along the coast, with a D-Day set for early November.[31] Infantry troops and equipment were sent directly from the USA, and diverted from the UK, to support the campaign. The shipping of construction units and supplies to the UK dried up and the 343rd struggled to finish the many projects they were involved in. The next few months were spent outfitting the line company with supplies and equipment in preparation for North Africa. During this time members of the regiment, including carpenter Jack Sharp, built a small concrete castle at the entrance to South Camp in memory of their work there.[32] Eventually the 343rd received orders to leave the UK and departed the Nettlebed camp complex in December 1942,[33] landing near Oran, Algeria where they started on the construction of a 6,400-bed hospital.[34]

Operation Torch made any cross-Channel invasion in 1943 all but impossible, and by the winter of 1942 there was only one US combat division in Britain,[35] leaving many of the purpose-built camps sparsely filled. US forces continued to arrive but mainly air force personnel and supplies destined for existing RAF sites in the east of England.

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[30] Ruppenthal, p. 88.

[31] Ross, W.F. and Romamus, C.F. *U.S. Army in World War II, The Technical Services, The Quartermaster Corps, Operations in the War against Germany*, Center of Military History, United States Army, Washington, D.C., 1991, p. 39.

[32] A stylized castle has been used as the official insignia of the Corps of Engineers for over a hundred years.

[33] www.6thcorpscombatengineers.com/ArmondeCasagrande.

[34] Ibid, 'More on the 343rd'.

[35] Reynolds, p. 108.

Exercise Spartan

The invasion of occupied Europe from Britain was still the principal intent and planning for it occupied much of the thinking of the American, British and Canadian military. In the first half of March 1943 a major training operation, codenamed Exercise Spartan,[36] took place over southern England. The exercise was a test for the Canadians, who faced British troops fulfilling the role of the German forces. The First Canadian Army was tasked with making an armoured thrust with large numbers of tanks across much of the home counties. Bridges that had been supposedly destroyed by the enemy were marked as such and had to be replaced with temporary military structures.

Figure 6: Canadian troops on a Churchill tank journey through part of the Chilterns as part of Exercise Spartan, March 1943. (Credit: World War ll Today).

In part of the assignment, Canadian soldiers on tanks rolled through many of the small villages in the Nettlebed, Henley and Stonor area heading towards High Wycombe.[37] It is likely that this event was the one recalled by Nettlebed resident Avril Bryant, "My sister Gwyneth still remembers the

[36] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exercise_Spartan.

[37] https://ww2talk.com/index.php?threads/exercise-spartan.7543.

day Canadian soldiers gave her, Cyril, and their friend Freddy Warner a lift in a tank along the Carriage Drive dropping the thrilled youngsters at the Grove gates. Cyril says he can still remember it today, though he was not very old. The driver sat him on his knee so that he could look through the observation slit."[38]

Bolero Reinvigorated

The lull in the buildup of American ground troops continued until mid-1943, but once a 1944 invasion date seemed inevitable there became an urgent need to get more troops to Europe quickly. The *Queen Mary* became the chosen transport option; she was fast and if needed could transport an entire regiment. Painted grey, and nicknamed by the Americans the Gray Ghost, in late July 1943 she sailed from New York to Gourock in 4 days, 20 hours, and 42 minutes, carrying 16,683 passengers, made up of 15,740 troops and 943 crew, still a record for the greatest number of people on a floating vessel.[39]

The American troop numbers in the British Isles rose rapidly, doubling from 774,000 in December 1943 to 1,527,000 in May 1944.[40] The strategic military attention began to turn to the practicalities, following a successful invasion, of ensuring a rapid advancement to Berlin, the ultimate target. Experiences in Africa and Italy had shown that the Nazis were methodical in retreat for their destruction of infrastructure. In many situations, it was the reconstruction of partially destroyed bridges, and the building of new bridges that could safely carry heavy tanks, that were the critical elements to unblock a stalled advance. The job of restoring these transport links would fall to the British and Canadian Corps of Royal Engineers and the US Corps of Engineers and their combat divisions who, unlike general service divisions like the 343rd, could fight back when working under hostile fire, being armed with machine guns, anti-tank rocket and grenade launchers.[41] The 207th Engineer Combat Battalion crossed the Atlantic on the *Queen Mary* on 3 December 1943, and were billeted initially at Devizes,

[38] https://www.nettlebed.org/godwin-family-second-world-war.
[39] Harding, p. 78.
[40] Ruppenthal, p. 231.
[41] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Engineer_Combat_Battalion.

Wiltshire before being transferred to Nettlebed on 24 December 1943, where they stayed until March the following year.[42]

Bridge Building On The River Thames

Since before the First World War, army engineers had used the Thames in Oxfordshire to practice the various techniques of building bridges to move men and heavy equipment across rivers.[43] At the start of the Second World War, a site at Howbery Park, just north of Wallingford, was established as a training centre. It became known as the Royal Engineers Bridging Camp and various river locations were selected for training from Wallingford all the way down to Henley. In June 1943 the British Royal Engineers practiced building a temporary pontoon bridge across the Thames from the bottom of New Street in Henley.[44]

Figure 7: The Royal Engineers of the British Army practice floating pontoon bridge-building at Henley in June 1943. (Credit: Imperial War Museum).

[42] http://www.6thcorpscombatengineers.com/docs/Engineers/207th%20Engineers%20Brief%20History.pdf.

[43] www.goringheath.com/all-about-goring-heath/local-history-31.

[44] Imperial War Museum, Photograph Collection, Object H 30978.

With the arrival of the Americans, an American Engineer School was established at Howbery Park in late 1943 to meet US Army requirements.[45] One key need was for the various units within the Corps of Engineers to familiarise themselves with British bridge-building methods, particularly the different formats of the Bailey bridge and how it could be used as a fixed-span structure. In this form the bridge could span gaps of up to 240 feet without central support,[46] so was ideal for ravines, medium-width rivers, and streams where pontoons could not be used. Built on-shore, and on rollers behind a lightweight launching nose, the bridge was either physically or mechanically pushed across with the back part weighted down as a counterbalance to prevent it falling into the gap. Initial training and Bailey bridge-building practice took place in Wallingford at the Chalmore Gardens site where the river was approximately 200-feet wide and there was substantial concrete hardstanding for laying out the various parts, practicing partial dry assembly, and storing equipment.

The Nettlebed-based 207th Engineer Combat Battalion spent the first few months of 1944 pooling resources and information with the British at Howbery Park, learning about the Bailey bridge and sharing their knowledge of the American pontoon-based Treadway system. They were attached operationally to the 1110th Engineer Combat Group, head-quartered at Sonning, Berkshire.[47] Other attached local units involved in joint exercises were the 148th Engineer Combat Battalion and the 631st Engineer Light Equipment Company both stationed at Chiseldon Camp, south of Swindon; the 300th Engineer Combat Battalion located at Devizes, Wiltshire; and the 512th Engineer Company (Light Ponton) based at Pangbourne, Berkshire.[48]

Another specialised bridge-building unit, the 989th Engineer Treadway Bridge Company, reached Liverpool on 8 January 1944 and was taken by

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45 https://www.usarmygermany.com/School_Comd/USAREUR_SchoolCommand.htm#History.

46 'How the Army's Amazing Bailey Bridge is Built', *The War Illustrated*, January 19, 1945, Volume 8, No. 198, p. 564.

47 https://www.7tharmddiv.org/docrep/images/US-Non-7AD/1110th%20Engr%20Gp/1110-Hist-1943-1945.pdf.

48 https://theddaystory.com/discover/family-history/united-states-of-america/Locations of US troops in the UK.

train to Goring, and then by truck to their permanent station at Kingwood Common, becoming close neighbours of the 207th. The company consisted of around 60 to 80 enlisted men, specifically trained in the erection of steel Treadway pontoon bridges.[49] Working alongside Engineer Combat personnel, they trained intensively, day and night, and in a period of three weeks erected, then dismantled, more than 50 practice bridges across the Thames at Mapledurham.[50] The Thames at Pangbourne, by the Whitchurch bridge, was another favoured location, being close to the camp of the 512th Engineer Light Ponton Company and within easy reach of other US bridge-building units.

Figure 8: The river Thames at Mapledurham was extensively used by the US for bridge-building practice. This vertical aerial photograph was taken by the USAAF on 8 March 1944 and shows several part-built pontoon bridges. (Credit: Historic England, Aerial Photo Exp

[49] https://www.989thengineertreadway.com.

[50] https://tankdestroyer.net/images/2010/08/180-Days-XIII-Corps-Report-Prt-2.pdf, p. 32.

The US Army liked the Bailey bridge but some thought it took too long to erect. A stretch of water north of Goring, opposite Moulsford, was chosen as a practice site for a competition between British, Canadian, and American engineers to establish just how quickly a fixed Bailey bridge could be erected across a gap close to its maximum. According to reports,[51] on one occasion in front of many military dignitaries, Company E of the 107th Engineering Combat Battalion completed the task in 40 minutes, from previous best times of three hours and one hour ten minutes. No doubt the pub on the opposite bank, *The Beetle and Wedge*, provided some incentive, and members of the victorious unit were treated as a reward to a keg of ale and a half-day off. Apparently, the success of this demonstration was the principal reason the Bailey bridge saw such extensive use during the conflict.[52]

Preparing For D-Day

In early 1944 the Nettlebed camps housed the 207th Engineer Combat Battalion, but like many camps they were bursting at the seams with other US units that made up the vast invasion force assembled in Southern England. The camps were full and as a result billeting throughout the village had to be resorted to, utilising such buildings as the village hall, several cottages on the High Street, and *The White Hart Hotel*. In February 1944, sharing camp occupancy with the 207th were the 18th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Group, the batteries of the 110th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Mobile Gun Battalion, and those of the 118th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Mobile Gun Battalion. These units left New York onboard the *Queen Mary* on 23 December 1943, arriving at Gourock on 29 December. Battery A of the 110th AAA battalion was kept busy for the entire voyage manning the ship's anti-aircraft guns.[53] Following disembarkation, their onward journey saw them at Reading on New Year's Day and Nettlebed on 2 January 1944.[54]

In common with all new units arriving in the UK, a week of orientation about England and the British people was required before any passes were

[51] Stonehouse, Chapter 6, p. 5.

[52] General Eisenhower considered the Bailey bridge to be one of the three revolutionary weapons of the war, along with radar and the heavy bomber.

[53] Harding, p. 41.

[54] https://ww2talk.com/index.php?threads/us-army-anti-aircraft-artillery-aaa-in-normandy.53156/page-2.

issued that allowed occasional sightseeing opportunities to Henley, Oxford, Reading, and London. Training continued once they settled in. They hiked several times a week and although stationed at Nettlebed, units were frequently moved to other camps closer to their probable embarkation ports, or travelled away on training exercises. The anti-aircraft groups in particular needed firing-range time, and practice in how to waterproof their vehicles and guns in preparation for an amphibious beach landing. They spent hours on aircraft identification using photographs and decks of Spotter Cards.[55] The late February/April movements of the batteries of the 110th AAA battalion were probably typical, as they left South Camp for a new station at Exmouth and prepared to be part of the D-Day landings on 6 June 1944.[56]

February 24 – Left Nettlebed at 0750 by truck convoy for permanent change of station. Reached Exmouth, Devon at 1745 after trip of 145 miles.

April 7 – Arrived in AA Firing Range at Tofanau, Wales at 0840 after trip of 260 miles.

April 15 – Arrived in Exmouth on return from AA Firing Range at Tofanau.

April 18 – Arrived in training areas at Broadsands Beach, Paignton, Devon for practice waterproofing of vehicles and guns.

April 26 – Arrived in Field Artillery practice area at North Molton, Devon at 1315.

April 28 – Arrived in Exmouth after completion of Field Artillery practice.

No sooner had one unit left Nettlebed, another one took its place. In April 1944, the camps had the following units in occupancy; the 118th and the 411th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Mobile Gun Battalions (HQ, Batteries A to D and Medical Detachments) and the 207th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Group (HQ and Battery).[57] Around about this time, Henley residents became aware that an invasion was probably imminent when they saw lines of US Army

[55] https://stcharlescountyveteransmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/SebastianWalter.pdf.
[56] The unit sailed from Plymouth on 6th June bound for Omaha Beach but were unable to land there until the 8th due to enemy artillery fire.
[57] Location of US units in the UK from February to August, 1944, from https://theddaystory.com/discover/family-history/united-states-of-america.

lorries extending along the entire Fairmile.[58] After months of artillery and assault training, alleviated by occasional trips down to Henley for fish and chips, the Nettlebed US units were ready to leave, and landed in Normandy on 9 June 1944 where they were designated to help defend Utah Beach after the D-Day assault troops had moved inland.[59]

Figure 9: US troops, most probably from the Nettlebed Camps, relax in the sunshine on Henley Bridge just a month before D-Day. (Credit: Frank Scherschel; Life Pictures/Shutterstock).

For the rest of the year, soldiers continued to arrive from the USA into British ports to replace, relieve or reinforce those already in Europe. Another bridge-building unit, the 257th Engineer Combat Battalion, arrived at Avonmouth, Bristol on 11 November 1944, after a very rough transatlantic crossing. Their misery was compounded by a transfer to Nettlebed North Camp as described in the letters of Vincent Bellis, "At 1 a.m. the next morning the soldiers entrained for Henley-on-Thames, and

[58] Jean Robert's memories, reported in 'VE Day 75th Anniversary Commemoration', *Henley Herald*, 7th May 2020.

[59] https://ww2talk.com/index.php?threads/us-army-anti-aircraft-artillery-aaa-in-normandy.53156/page-1.

from there they were transported by truck to a 'mud hole' called Nettlebed. Bed was a wooden crate with strips of tin serving as slats. The mattress was a burlap bag filled with straw. The soldiers had not been fed since leaving the ship. They were housed in cold, damp, corrugated iron buildings called Nissen Huts."[60] Five days later they moved on foot to the tented camp at the Wallingford Bridge Building Engineer School. The unit spent six weeks there practicing building Bailey bridges, before receiving orders on Christmas Eve to proceed to Southampton for transport to France.

Aftermath - The War Finally Ends but The Camps Fill Up

The war in Europe ended on 8 May 1945 and the Nettlebed camps were now ready to house their last two groups of inmates – prisoners of war, and members of the Polish Resettlement Corps and their relatives and dependents.

Britain's first taste of prisoners of war in any substantial number began in 1941 with the capture of Italian troops in Africa and the Middle East. More arrived after the Italian surrender in 1943, with most volunteering to work co-operatively in agriculture and forestry where unskilled labour was in short supply. They were generally not kept in camps but billeted on individual farms where their labour could best be utilised.

German prisoners of war were potentially more dangerous and many were still ardent Nazis. Their numbers increased rapidly in Britain from the summer of 1944 following the D-Day landings, reaching a peak of around 400,000 in September 1946, and then began to fall when repatriation began.[61] Britain's food shortage overrode the initial reluctance to employ them, and German POW camps in rural areas generally became agricultural working camps, as happened at Nettlebed North Camp, number 246, in the period 1945 to 1946.[62] The prisoners were employed on local farms, often working alongside members of the Women's Land Army.

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[60] '257th Engineer Combat Battalion – Oct 1944-May 1945', Vincent J. Bellis Jr., accessed at www.6thcorpscombatengineers.com/linksEngineers.htm.

[61] J. Anthony Hellen, Temporary Settlements and Transient Populations. The Legacy of Britain's Prisoner of War Camps: 1940-1948, Erdkunde (Archive for Scientific Geography) 1999, 53(3), 191-211.

[62] https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/prisoner-of-war-camps.

Figure 10: Many German POWs, as at Nettlebed North Camp, performed agricultural duties and often worked alongside members of the Women's Land Army. (Credit: George Lancett, People's Collection Wales).

Nettlebed South Camp became part of the efforts to house displaced Polish troops who had fought against Nazi Germany and opposed the Soviet takeover of their homeland. Ken Clarke, an infantry and military band member of the 1st Battalion of the Royal West Kent Regiment, recalls the day in late 1945 after the Japanese surrender when he arrived at South Camp: "I found myself in a group of a hundred men enroute to a place in Oxfordshire called Nettlebed that I had never heard of. Our camp was, in fact, at Highmoor, near Nettlebed, and now housed hundreds of Polish troops although it had originally been built to accommodate units of the American army when the USA came into the war in 1942. Highmoor camp was renamed No. 84 Polish Repatriation Unit and our job was the general administration of the camp. The Polish troops were being assembled from far and near, many having served in North Africa and Italy and others who, when their country was overrun, had been conscripted into the

German army and had given themselves up at the first opportunity when sent to the front."[63]

The Polish Resettlement Corps was formally set up in May 1946 as an unarmed and non-combatant military unit operating under British authority. South Camp became the focus for the 15th Polish Rifle Battalion.[64] The debt the UK owed to the Polish people developed further with the Polish Resettlement Act of 1947, where over 200,000 displaced Poles were offered British citizenship. Opportunities were provided to learn English and take vocational work training, and resettlement camps opened in over 200 former barracks, military hospitals, RAF bases and POW camps with the Ministry of Defence transferring their running to the National Assistance Board. The German POW tenure of North Camp appears to have been rather brief and by the start of 1947 both camps were recorded as being used by the Polish Resettlement Corps.

Throughout this time, there was local pressure and complaints from Nettlebed residents who wanted the North Camp site demolished and returned for commons use. They voiced their concerns through Sir Gifford Fox, Conservative MP for Henley, who with little empathy for the plight of the displaced Polish people, in Parliament on 27 February 1947 asked the Secretary of State for War "when he anticipates removing the Army huts which disfigure Nettlebed Common, Oxfordshire, and which interfere with the amenities."[65] The response from the Secretary was that both camps were occupied by units of the Polish Resettlement Corps and he could not state when the huts would be dismantled and removed. Gifford Fox tabled further questions on 13 May 1947 regarding how many Polish people were at the camps and was told the North Camp had 238, the South Camp 560.[66] He again asked when the camps might be demolished, receiving the same answer as before.

Eventually it would appear that this persistence to restore commons rights at the North Camp site prevailed and the camp removed sometime in the

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[63] 'Every Day a Bonus' by Ken Clarke, BUFFS Journal, No. 20, Summer 2010, p. 36, accessed at http://friendsofthebuffs-rekr.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Journal-No-20-Summer-2010.pdf.

[64] www.polishresettlementcampsintheuk.co.uk/PRC/PRC.htm.

[65] Hansard, House of Commons, 25 February 1947, Vol. 433.

[66] Hansard, House of Commons, Written Answers, 13 May 1947, Vol. 437.

late 1940s. Polish workers and their families remained at the larger and newer South Camp until around 1955,[67] when that camp also faced demolition and the occupants transferred to the larger resettlement centre at Checkendon.[68]

What Remains Today Of The Camps?

After the passage of 80 years or so, little remains of either camp and there are only a few signs of the presence of hundreds of servicemen whom once occupied part of this peaceful rural landscape.

Nature has reclaimed the woodland areas of both camps, although some overgrown concrete footings can still be seen at the site of North Camp. There one structural item remains – a brick-built motor vehicle garage on the east side of Old Camp Road. Two other features deserve mention – to the north of the High Street near what was once part of the anti-aircraft defences lies a portion of the Nissen ammunition shed in the garden of one of the houses on the east side of The Ridgeway, in use as a garage. Finally, approximately mid-way between the two camps is the sewage treatment plant built by the engineers of the 343rd regiment and operated for the benefit of the village, and still in use today.

Figure 11: The physical remains of the two camps are few. At the North Camp, on Old Camp Road, lies the overgrown remains of a brick-built motor vehicle garage (Credit: Google Street View 2009); on The Ridgeway in a garden of one of the houses, stands part of the Nissen ammunition shed now used as a garage (Credit: P. Sparrowhawk); and between the two camps in the woods is the sewage treatment plant (Credit: Google Earth 2020).

At what was the South Camp entrance, perhaps the most poignant reminder of the past is the little concrete castle monument that is a source of curiosity to many that pass along the Highmoor road. This model of the insignia of the US Army Corps of Engineers marks the spot where in 1942

[67] 'Polish Motor Cyclist Fined' *Reading Standard*, 30 October 1953, p. 3.
[68] https://www.polishresettlementcampsintheuk.co.uk/camps2.htm.

they built the South Camp complex – their first act of the Second World War on European soil. But it also stands as a testament to the war-time closeness of UK/US relationships, in this case between one of the castle's builders, Jack Sharp, who fell in love with, and in June 1945 married, Joyce Ellen Smith, a Nettlebed resident. She became one of the many GI brides of the Second World War and ended up making a new life in Des Moines, Iowa.[69]

On several occasions after the war, the couple returned to Nettlebed to visit friends and family, and always found time to clean and repaint the little castle, the last time being in 1982.[70] The monument continues to be cherished and cared for today by descendants of one of the original Polish families that once lived there.

Figure 12: Left - Jack and Joyce Sharp at work with a paint brush giving the little castle monument a face-lift in July 1982 (Credit: Reading Evening Post), Right – The castle in May 2024 (Credit: Author).

[69] 'Iowa brides among the 2,396' *Des Moines Tribute*, 19 February 1946, p. 5.
[70] 'Keeping castle spruced up' *Reading Evening Post*, 22 July 1982, p. 4.

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Memories from early childhood of wartime Henley

John Bailey

Young children accept the world the way it is, never having known anything other. I have sometimes had to explain to younger people that neither I nor most of my contemporaries felt deprived or in constant fear when our earliest years were spent whilst the Second World War raged. Of course, this is not to say that had we been in the midst of an actual war zone, in physical danger daily or on the brink of starvation that we might not have felt differently. But it does mean that it was the adults and the older children, who had known a different world, who felt a sense of loss in places like Henley. We young ones mostly still felt loved and safe. We were happy with our toys that older people probably thought shoddy or ersatz, while, having never tasted ice-cream, we did not miss it.

I was born in November 1939 [Now 84, and 6 at the end of the war], and before I was four years old, I was certainly aware that there was a war on, but, again, I accepted this as part of normal life. I knew about refugees and evacuees and the difference between them. Quite early in the hostilities an elderly couple on my father's side of the family were bombed out and came to stay with us. I have no real memory of this because, like many others, they moved back to their original area as soon as it seemed safe to do so. But I do remember a girl in my first class at the Infant School being described as an evacuee, so some clearly stayed longer in Henley. I understood that the term meant that the girl in question had moved to Henley because of "the war" without considering whether this had been a difficult experience for her. As for refugees, the two sisters, schoolmistresses, in the next house to ours took in a man who had fled from eastern Europe. I think my mother may have looked on him with a slight degree of suspicion, perhaps because of his impenetrable accent.

My father's father was the head gardener at Parkside, a gentleman's residence with eight acres of grounds situated between Badgemore Road and Pack and Prime Lane, my father also having been employed there as the second gardener for about 20 years when war broke out. Once my father had been called up for the Army, his widowed father and my mother, rather than try to keep two houses going, moved in together. Once our evacuees had departed, there were, therefore, three of us (including me) in the gardener's cottage, when one evening we made our first close

contact with the United States Army, several of whom had been billeted at the "big house".

Captain Jamie Taylor had decided to make our acquaintance. Before long he was a frequent visitor. He had a "dog tag" made for me, and I remember a short ride in a jeep. When he wrote to his wife in Alabama to say how kindly he had been treated, she, aware of our problems with clothing coupons, thought it would be appropriate to send a nightdress as a present to my mother. This kind gesture misfired, as my mother had to pay a large sum of duty before the parcel could be delivered.

Of course, the date of D-Day was supposed to be a closely guarded secret. But on the evening before his departure for France, Captain Taylor made another of his visits, confessing how scared he was and to say goodbye "just in case". At some time after V.E. Day, Jamie Taylor, now a major, paid us another visit on his way back to America. Having agreed in advance to put him up for the night, we made him an apple-pie bed, of which he saw the funny side.

Reverting to D-Day, it could not have remained a secret for much longer once we had been told about it as the noise of planes going over all night made it quite clear what was happening to every adult. I do remember that the next day, or possibly the next but one, when I had been kept home from school because of some minor ailment, my mother showing me the front page of the *Daily Express*, where there was a map with arrows on it to indicate the Allies' progress. I did not really understand what this meant, but I recall my mother's excitement and so knew that it must be something important.

Soon after the American soldiers had left, a small contingent of British ones was installed in the big house. We befriended one called Fred, asking him to share our Christmas Day lunch. Thus, it was that on December 25th, 1945, when many people were unable even to share a Christmas pudding, we had two: one for which my mother had been saving the ingredients for a long while and another provided by the British Army.

My father, though stationed in this country, had not been able to get home for Christmas, but I do remember the small presents (a wooden rhinoceros with jointed legs and a paperback book telling how Bulldog Bill joined the Army) and even the odd bar of chocolate that he was able to bring me from time to time. His leaves were mainly for 24, 48 or 72 hours, and sometimes he would bring another soldier, further

from home, to entertain him for a couple of hours or so. Before the war there had been four full-time gardeners at Parkside rather than the now somewhat elderly head gardener assisted only by a young school-leaver. My grandfather, who looked on the garden as his rather than his employers', was always disappointed if my father did not want to join him in working on the neglected areas during his leaves.

In one of the annual weeks set aside by the Government to raise through National Savings money to help different aspects of the war effort – which one, I fear, I can no longer remember – there was a competition between classes at the Infant School as to which one could raise most. The event was quite competitive, and when my grandfather heard of it he decided to give £100 – a tidy sum in those days, though one he might well have invested directly in other circumstances. Of course, my class won, and the mystery donor was mentioned especially at the school assembly. When I told a little girl that my granddad had been the donor, my mother denied this to the girl's mother, explaining to me afterwards that no one was supposed to know that Grandad had so much money!

We lived somewhat out of town in Pack and Prime Lane, so when the news broke that peace had been declared, we had no near neighbours who might know how Henley was proposing to celebrate that night. So, my mother put me in the little seat on the back of her bike, and we went off to see my Aunt Daisy, who, living in Queen Street and working at Stuart Turner, was right in the thick of things. We learned that the boy scouts had collected plenty of rubbish to build a big bonfire on "the Rec" and constructed an effigy of Adolf Hitler to take the place of Guy Fawkes, who had, of course, had a quiet life since 1939. I still remember the cheer as Hitler fell into the fire. I did not find it especially exciting but understood that it was reckoned an event of some significance.

When the day came for a children's party in 1946 to mark the end of the war, I was ill and missed the occasion. But soon afterwards, when my father was on demob leave, my mother asked Miss Goodall, the headmistress at the Infant School, if I could have a compensatory day's holiday so that we could all visit London Zoo and see Miss Unity, the panda sent as a present from Nationalist China. I had adored pandas, usually toy ones, from a very early age. Miss Unity kept her distance during our visit, but the highlight of the day for me was my first taste of ice-cream, which could legally be sold again. It tasted even better than the rose-hip syrup, for which we lined up daily at the Infant School to provide us with the Vitamin C then difficult to obtain from other sources.

Another revival in the summer of 1946 was trips to the sea by means of Bert Butler's coaches. I had never seen the sea, but from books I knew all about making sandcastles. It was a big event when we went to buy for me a bucket and spade from Giles's shop in Gravel Hill. I barely slept for excitement the night before, but I was still full of energy for the memorable day that followed.

Prior to re-entering civilian life, each serviceman was given a demob suit as a parting gift. That these were of poor quality or ill-fitting was often the subject of comedians' jokes. My father found that, in his case at least, the comedians' assessment was not far wide of the mark.

Also in 1946, the town of Henley gave a dinner at the Town Hall for the servicemen who had returned home. This was financed at least in part by public subscription. I remember that my father was somewhat underwhelmed by the occasion, especially perhaps by the menu.

There were some things that bridged the divide between the wartime world and the world of peace. One of these was the siren. I remember hearing the different signals for the alert and the all-clear while the war was going on, but I do not recall the adults being much worried by the warning. I think they felt that any bombs were unlikely to be aimed at Henley, though I do not know how far away the enemy planes had to be before the siren was sounded. (In a similar spirit of impregnability my mother and I went out into the garden to see a doodlebug flying over.)

After the war, the siren was used in Henley to summon the members of the voluntary fire service to any outbreak of fire. It was also sounded on Sunday mornings to make sure it was still in good working order.

I have to add that there were a few incidents relevant to my theme that I did not find out about till afterwards. For one, a persistent rumour in 1939 that a good knowledge of first aid might lead to call-up to the armed services being avoided or delayed led my father and many others to enrol for classes organised by the St John Ambulance.

Neither, I think, did it occur to my five-year-old self that, once the war was over, servicemen could still be in danger, let alone that a boy with whom I later became friendly could lose his father when an ammunition dump exploded after peace had been declared. I was aware that squatters had moved into the old Army huts at Dry

Leas but did not then know that some still had no glass in the windows in the bitter winter of 1946-47.

For me, the war was over, and, when I thought of it all, I saw it as something I could put behind me, but also a period on which I could look back without feeling any sadness.

Front cover illustration: Fawley Court. (*Credit: Susanna Venn*)

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