

CHORLEY & DISTRICT IN WORLD WAR TWO



A LOCAL SUMMARY

By Stuart A. Clewlow, FRHistS

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Almost from the outset, what was to become known as World War Two, was `total war`. To that affect, it wasn't just the military that were caught up in the action. In an age of warfare and technology developing rapidly hand in hand, and German re-armament spreading fear and anxiety across the rest of Europe, it was now also the civilians who were directly at risk. In two waves civilians became closely involved and in turn, at direct personal risk of becoming a casualty of war. At first they were encouraged to do their bit by growing their own food, making do and mend, accepting and adapting to rationing, etc. However, it later became necessary for the people to be more directly involved.

"There may be dark days ahead, and war can no longer be confined to the Battlefield." - King George VI speech, 3rd September 1939.



Above: King George VI. (S.A. Clewlow)

Women not only enlisted to work in the Munitions Factories (one of which being the old Ordnance Factory in Euxton) producing bullets and grenades, etc, they were also breaking down the social barriers yet further and becoming involved even closer with the military. Young women were being trained up as Pilots and as such would ferry newly produced aircraft to their designated squadrons and airfields. They were also manning the anti-aircraft gun batteries (of which many sprang up around the district), which would protect the British industrial centres and sites of military importance.

Even the men who were too old or unfit for active service still found their position within the war machine. One such position was within Local Defence Volunteer groups that mobilised around the country. They consisted of `old boys` who had fought in World War One or even the Boer War (of 1899-1902) and those unfit or too young for military service abroad. The LDV later became officially known as the Home Guard and later more affectionately by the people as Dad's Army. Chorley, Coppull and Adlington for example had such units and they trained hard during the war, going on exercises in the Pennine area, working on security duties around the borough.

There was also the Women's Voluntary Services, Air Raid Precaution Wardens, Fire watchers, ROF Chorley Ordnance workers, Auxiliary Fire Service, Women's Land Army, and many more voluntary groups. People were just not able to escape war as it also made a visual impact on the district of Chorley. It should not be forgotten that the area was a lot more rural than it is today, so the industrial social affects of the war were a massive blot on the countryside.

Windows were blacked out to prevent enemy bombers navigating their way to a target, windows taped up so as to minimise the damage of the window shattering, street lighting was disconnected, air raid shelters were built, concrete pill boxes were constructed, just to name a few. One such pillbox stood beside the bridge over the River Yarrow at Eccleston. Alongside which was a row of cylindrical concrete blocks which were produced to obstruct the path of any invading enemy tanks. Perhaps more pleasing to the eye was seeing the many front and back gardens in the borough, being dug up, turned over and surrendered to the cause of growing vegetables and fruits; supporting the `Dig for Victory` national campaign. Some people even went to the lengths of rearing chickens, some even went to the extremes of keeping pigs- but every little helped.

The people that would once have been seen as innocent bystanders of war, were now taking active parts. Most were now viewed as contributors or defenders and as such, became seen as legitimate targets by the enemy.

Men and women were working during the day and being on duty for the Home Guard at night, or juggling the upkeep of a house with a shift in the munitions factory. Everybody was doing their bit. But as if it wasn't enough that they donated what little spare time they had, they were also donating what little spare money they had. During World War Two, money was donated by famous people, wealthy people, groups and organisations, down to the collective generosity of entire communities. As the latter, the people of Chorley and District excelled. For what at the time was a much smaller population than today, they aided the war effort with the purchase of a `presentation` Spitfire fighter aeroplane for the Royal Air Force and even the sponsorship of a Submarine for the Royal Navy. Both of which made a contribution to the eventual Allied victory in 1945 and as such, was a result of the tireless efforts, generosity and sheer determination of the people of Chorley and District to prevail victorious.

***"We shall not fail or falter; we shall not weaken or tire...
...Give us the tools and we will finish the job."***

Prime Minister Churchill, BBC radio broadcast, 9th February 1941.



Above: Winston Churchill (S.A. Clewlow)

THE WAR FUND

Throughout the Battle of Britain and the Blitz of 1940, the British Government found itself in a state of economic problems. Money had to be spent to repair bomb damaged areas; its buildings, infrastructures, airfields, etc. There was also the expense of maintaining the coastal and inland defences as well as keeping the three fighting forces running at full strength: the Royal Navy, Army and Royal Air Force.

Solutions and shortcuts to financial difficulties were found in one way or another. One method was the introduction of war bonds that civilians could buy. War Savings was introduced in 1939 and fund raising campaigns developed from there. Another was encouraging the public to send parcels to servicemen, consisting of a kind uplifting letter, a packet of cigarettes or an item of knit ware for example. To help the Government increase aircraft productivity, the Air Ministry set up `funds`. This enabled anybody to donate money, gifts, pots and pans, etc. In fact, during summer 1940, students of St. Paul's School, Adlington, collected aluminium for aeroplanes.

Local governments showed support by cutting down metal railings throughout the local areas. Today, we can still see ground down metal stumps along the top of many front garden walls, especially on rows of terraced houses across the borough.

During and after the Battle of Britain, the Spitfire became somewhat symbolic of British resilience to the threats of the enemy. In fact, throughout the Battle of Britain, 459 Hawker Hurricanes and 292 Supermarine Spitfires took part. In truth, the Spitfire stood alongside its Hurricane counterpart. Regardless, the Spitfire became the poster image across the country for raising awareness of the "Spitfire Fund" and also the "Wings for Victory" National Savings campaigns.

As well as the individual efforts, whole districts also mobilised in buying `presentation` aircraft. As a district, people contributed money to the cause and if the target was met, the money was donated to the Air Ministry to construct an aircraft on their behalf.

An additional way to raise money was to purchase items in support of the cause, in a very similar way as today, we buy coloured ribbons or wristbands in support of charities. Items could be bought such as `Spitfire Fund` badges or `Victory Bells` made from the recycled metal of downed enemy aircraft.



Above: A `Victory Bell`, made from downed enemy aircraft. (S.A .Clewlow)

The cost of buying a 1940 Spitfire at that time was publicly quoted in the North West of England as being £6,000. The equivalent cost today would stand at over a hundred times greater! Actually most towns and districts in Britain held a `Spitfire Week`, normally consisting of a parade or festival where farthings, three-penny bits or even a bob, was donated.

If desired, the donating association, district, or even individual, could have their name printed (normally by the engine cowling) on their presentation aeroplane.



Above: A donors name proudly emblazoned on their presentation aeroplane.
(Crown copyright)

The fact that ordinary people of Britain were able to help the war effort raised morale and pride in the Royal Air Force, the junior of the three forces. The donors bore in mind that a machine to which they had contributed towards would be waging war against the enemy. In the early days of the war, the Royal Air Force, and particularly Bomber Command, was the only way that the British and her allies were able to strike back.



Above: P8593 - The Chorley & District Spitfire. (Crown Copyright)
Below: Douglas Watkins, DFC – one of the Pilots of P8593.
(No.611 Squadron Collection- Mr. Aldon P. Ferguson)





Above: Chief ARP Warden John Gibson of Aspull & Haigh. (S.A. Clewlow)

Part of a precaution initiative for Chorley District was an ARP lookout built on the roof of Chorley Town Hall and there was even the elaborate installation of a Civil and Army `fire and lights` decoy site located at Belmont; this was designed in such a way as to distract any enemy activity aimed towards the Royal Ordnance Factory in Euxton which would of course, have been thrown under the cover of darkness if an attack was suspected.

ROF Chorley, as it was known, although it was built adjacent to the village of Euxton, was a 928 acre site. It was one of two of the largest armaments filling factories in the country. The site comprised of many individual buildings linked by paths, roads and railways and contained extensive underground magazines.

At the beginning of the Second World War, ROF Chorley employed about 1,000 people. By 1940 this figure had risen to 15,000; rising drastically again to 28,000 before the end of the war in 1945. ROF Chorley, during the war, became the largest ammunition filling establishment in the world. These facts and figures show the magnitude of production at the site and ultimately, just how important a role it played during the war. The ROF was only ever bombed once and that was on the perimeter.

As the attack on Adlington was not just a one off, or even a stray bomb, it was later thought that the course of the Leeds & Liverpool Canal and Railway lines at the time, gave the Luftwaffe the impression that Adlington was an important industrial centre and so, an important military target. In 1940 Adlington had other railway lines (since removed) due to the high levels of coal mines and quarries in the surrounding areas.

One of the only direct war supporting industries within the village was the Pincroft Dye Works (off the A6- on the Adlington / Blackrod boundary) who fulfilled clothing contracts for the War Ministry. It was perhaps known by the enemy, that Chorley Borough was infact quite an important wartime area. Not only were there important production sites in the area, there was also: Home Guard units, a Spanish Republican servicemen campsite in Heath Charnock, a Soldier billet at Adlington Hall, an Italian Prisoner of War camp near Leyland, American servicemen based at Washington Hall in Euxton, and even tank and troop training sites around Rivington, Ellerbeck quarry and colliery sand dunes near Duxbury. It even became a familiar site to see tanks driven from their production lines, along Euxton Lane, Bolton Street, out of Chorley, and to the testing ground off Wigan Lane near Coppull.

Another theory for Adlington attracting Luftwaffe attention, was that from the air, the layout of the village was directly mistaken for that of the Royal Ordnance Factory at Euxton, or even the Locomotive Works at Horwich. During the war bombs also fell at: The Bobbin Mill, off Dawbers Lane, Euxton; Welch Whittle Colliery, Chorley town centre, Denham Hall Farm in Brindle; and incendiaries fell over Coppull.

There was the `Spitfire Fund` of 1940 and the `War Weapons Week` of 1941, but the generosity of the people of Chorley and District knew no bounds.

The spirit of donating time, effort, possessions and money to assist the allied war industry remained with the people of Chorley and District throughout World War Two. Just because the `Spitfire Fund` and `War Weapons Week` was over, the war was still being waged and so the people continued to give.

`Warship Week` ran through Chorley and District from 31st January 1942 to 7th February 1942 and was launched by Admiral Sir Percy Noble K.C.B., C.V.O. and Commander of H.M.S/m `Ursula`, Lieutenant A. R. Hezlet, D.S.C. During the `Warship Week` the target was an immense £175,000 and the sponsoring of the pre-designated submarine H.M.S/m `Ursula`. That figure would account for the hull of the submarine. However, a sum of £425,000 would cover the entire build of such a vessel.

The opening of the effort proved to be just as grand as the total hoped to be donated. Proceedings commenced on the Cattle Market with an Admirals Guard of Honour of the Royal Navy, and detachments of the Royal Air Force, Women's Auxiliary Air Force, Preston Sea Cadet Corps, and the Air Training Corps. There then followed a parade accompanied by the band of the Loyal (North Lancashire) Regiment.

Later in the week an exhibition was held in Shepherd's Hall, Chapel Street to promote the new fundraising efforts. On view were Navy photographs, posters, models of war machines and numerous types of munitions, from bullets to a depth charge. They also began the sale of H.M.S/m `Ursula` postcards to encourage donations similarly to the lapel badges of the `Spitfire Fund`.

By 23rd April 1943, HMS/m `Ursula` had 13 enemy vessels to its credit which were marked on its `Jolly Roger`. The flag was hoisted high above the aft-end of the bridge, above the Periscope Standards, and on a short flag pole. Further actions also included its crew boarding three Italian ships during which they obtained a lot of useful technical material, instruments and information before blowing the ships up.

In brief, HMS/m `Ursula` played a part in the Mediterranean and African theatres of the war and was even involved in some covert SBS (Special Boat Service) operations.

The submarine was loaned to the Soviet Navy as part of a lend scheme in 1944. It had further successes against the enemy in the Arctic Ocean and stayed in that area after the war. It was then returned to the Royal Navy in 1949 and sadly, scrapped in 1950.



Above: `Ursula` celebrated in the `Chorley Guardian.`



Above: the Jolly Roger of HMS/m `Ursula.` (S.A. Clewlow)

CONCLUSION

Victory in Europe (VE) Day came to the nation on 8th May 1945. There was much rejoicing and celebrations and parties in the street; but war was still being fought in the East. Hundreds of service personnel from the district were still fighting the cause until finally, Victory over Japan (VJ) Day came on 15th August 1945.

World War Two was over, but it came at a price. Not only did the district raise in excess of £1.5 million as a result of various fundraising campaigns, but more importantly, victory came at the expense of many young lives. Around 450 men and women from Chorley & District made the ultimate sacrifice during World War Two. It is estimated that ten times that number will have seen active service and many of those would have received injuries, imprisonment, or witnessed events and situations that would impact upon the rest of their lives. It should also be remembered that the war also directly affected the civilian population. Not only did they endure rationing and shortages but they were also directly at risk of aerial attack and bombardment.



Above: Brancker Street party (Chorley) 1945.

In 2020, we acknowledge the 75th anniversaries of VE Day and VJ Day. In the Borough of Chorley, we are still fortunate to have a handful of residents amongst us who saw uniformed service during World War Two. Far from wanting to glorify conflict, we are commemorating the service of that generation and celebrating the peace their actions brought us. It is a peace we still enjoy today and it has given us a freedom of speech and lifestyle that we should not take for granted.

***"IN MEMORY OF ALL SERVICE PEOPLE,
PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE,
FROM, OR LAID TO REST IN,
CHORLEY AND DISTRICT...
WE WILL REMEMBER THEM."***



Above: Chorley & District Civic War Memorial, Astley Park 2020. (S.A. Clewlow)

“Lest we Forget.”

Presented by Local Historian and Author
Stuart A. Clewlow, FRHistS

Some of my first public displays of local history and military artefacts was back in 1995 to commemorate the 50th Anniversaries of VE Day and VJ Day. Since then I have been researching and collecting information and artefacts of local importance and sharing it across our Borough, whether that is in schools, community centres, public events and temporary exhibitions, such as the popular Chorley Remembers exhibition at Astley Hall Coach House.

My work has been rewarded with Civic Society Awards, Parish Council Awards and even an invitation to the Queen's Garden Party at Buckingham Palace. All that is extremely humbling but I like to see it as being a measure of just how interested and passionate we all are in our heritage.

A number of events and displays were planned to acknowledge the 75th anniversaries of VE Day and VJ Day in 2020 but these were affected due to the Coronavirus issues. Hopefully this brief publication will help raise awareness of our local involvement during the war and go a small way towards acknowledging the anniversaries.

Feel free to contact me if you can add any information to anything mentioned or if you would like to ask any specific questions about the subject.

My local history books include:

The Bolton to Blackpool Dance Trains
The Chorley & District Spitfire
HMS 'Ursula' - The Chorley & District Submarine
In Memoriam - Military Memorials and Graves (Borough of Chorley)
Euxton CE Primary School- Golden Jubilee
Euxton - Then & Now
Euxton Remembers
"Pals on Parade" (WW1 Brass music CD with Leyland Band)
ROF Chorley: 80th Anniversary

Please join, enjoy and share my Facebook groups:

Euxton Then & Now ROF Chorley (Buckshaw Village)
Chorley & District in World War Two



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