

# BROCKENHURST

## The Second World War and D-Day

### A Walk Through History



Original map by Potting Shed Cartoons, reproduced by kind permission of New Forest Community Rail Partnership.

The numbers and letters on this map relate to the narrative overleaf and the photographs (right) and show sites of interest. Number 4 is missed as it mainly references places outside the village. If taken as a walk, by starting at the rail station (1) you can follow the story chronologically.

Recommended parking - at the station or the village centre car park (paying).

The total distance is around two miles, and is on flat ground. It should take (allowing for stops) around two hours to complete. Please take care at road junctions and stick to pavements where possible.





Brockenhurst was busy throughout the Second World War. Many of the young people of the village went to fight. Those who stayed here coped as best they could, and became accepting of large numbers of extra 'residents'.

This not only included evacuees, but the military were also keen to use the village, initially for training, and later for the planning and the build-up for D-Day and the invasion of France.

This was because the village had many of the key facilities the Army and other forces wanted. A mainline railway station was important, as were the large hotels which could easily be converted for wartime use. Brockenhurst was also considered secure and 'out of the way' as spying was a constant fear.

The wartime story is told as you walk around the village and see the places which played their role in contributing to the ultimate victory.

### 1. Evacuees and schooling

In September 1939 a special train brought the boys of Portsmouth Secondary School to Brockenhurst to be billeted throughout the village in people's homes. They shared school facilities with Brockenhurst pupils at the County High School (now Brockenhurst College), and school buildings in Highwood Road. Arriving ill-equipped for the village road and path conditions in wet weather, some bemoaned the lack of city comforts. However many had fond memories of their time in Brockenhurst. Other evacuees included pupils from Southampton Girls' Orphanage swell the numbers.

### 2. Defence preparations

Brockenhurst prepared to defend itself in case there was a German invasion. To the west of the rail station (across Black Bridge from East Bank Road) you can see the outline of a dugout in the field. This is one of two that were created here in 1940 as an anti-invasion measure to be manned by the village Home Guard. There were other key defence points and machine gun pillboxes in Royden Wood, and in Mill Lane, and tank traps by Latchmore at the bottom of Sway Road.

### 3. Brockenhurst CofE Primary School

Shelters were built alongside the school. During air raids pupils sat with their gas masks and a block of chocolate each in case they were detained for a long

time. They sang patriotic songs and played games to raise their spirits.

### 4. Military training and hotels commanded

From 1940 the Army and Royal Marines used Brockenhurst as a training base. Tanks and infantry performed exercises on Wilverley Plain (*photo A overleaf*), while the Marines practiced jungle warfare in Royden Wood (**B**) and other 'leafy' places. The Balmer Lawn Hotel and Carey's Manor Hotel (**C**) became training headquarters for both British and Canadian forces including the Welsh Guards.

### 5. Bombs fall in the centre of Brockenhurst

On 13 August 1940 the village was attacked. A lone German Luftwaffe aircraft dropped several bombs. The first exploded at about 3.00am at Gates' Garage and the field alongside - now the Meadens Garage showroom.

Across the road another bomb dislodged the conservatory of Wide Lane Cottage (now Cottage Lodge Hotel). The next took the front off Purkess bakery shop (where the Jack Hull memorial is). The final three were at the bottom of Cairo Cottage garden (the Co-op funeral directors' garage), the former British Legion Club in Fibbards Road, and a garden at Careys Cottages.

No one was killed, but there were close escapes including a steward sleeping at the British Legion Club. He woke in the debris with the antlers of a deer round his neck - they were hung on the wall above his bed when he went to sleep.

In 1942 two very large bombs were dropped one night in the field between the Lymington Road and the railway end of Church Lane - about 200 metres from a train load of high explosives! These craters can still be seen in the field.

### 6. Outlying forest areas are cultivated for food

To increase food production the War Agricultural Committee established a depot at Hollands Wood and cleared large areas of the forest 'lawns' for food production. The areas of Black Knoll, Butts Lawn, Whitemoor, Longslade Bottom and Wilverley were cleared of gorse and ploughed to produce potatoes and other crops. As a result of this, today they are open plains. In some lights you can see the remains of plough furrows in the ground. In the village the Women's Institute opened a weekly pie shop in Brookley Road (Grovely Pets) selling meat pies with the support of the Ministry of Food. This lasted for several years after the war.

### 7. Brockenhurst plans for D-Day

In 1943 the Balmer Lawn Hotel was changed from an Army Staff College into a headquarters for planning the Normandy invasion. Generals Eisenhower and Montgomery visited frequently. The latter liked to address his troops and held a at least one morale raising briefing, stood on the bonnet of his Jeep at Butts Lawn (Meerut Road) for several hundred

soldiers. The children's Christmas party they hosted in 1943 is still remembered by some today who tasted ice cream and peanut butter for the first time!

Some of the 'Orders for the Day' were issued from the Balmer Lawn Hotel for the D-Day invasion.

### 8. Brockenhurst Station - a major staging post

The spring of 1944 brought train loads of tanks and trucks. Thousands of servicemen and women arrived to be encamped in Brockenhurst and nearby or to make their way to the nearby air bases such as Beaulieu Heath. Train loads of equipment arrived and seven new sidings were built to relieve pressure at the main train depot at Eastleigh. One eye-witness reports over 100 wagons in the sidings, many of them full of bombs and ammunition on their way to the New Forest airfields.

New military bases were established. The US Army occupied a marshalling camp in Brockenhurst Park for 1100 servicemen and their kit - another base was at the top of the hill near Setley. Local people were warned not to 'fraternise' with soldiers, but many opened their doors to allow them to have baths and some home comfort.

### 9. WWII traffic congestion as D-Day neared

With troops and equipment pouring into Brockenhurst in preparation for D-Day the village became a huge one-way system. Vehicles were stored in the main roads and side streets had parking bays marked out for jeeps, armoured carriers and light tanks. Along Sway Road and elsewhere concrete blocks were laid to provide hard standing for trucks and bridges on Mill Lane (**C**) and Lyndhurst Road were strengthened.

As D-Day approached the parking bays filled and Military Police patrolled. No traffic was allowed to enter Sway Road at Latchmoor and Mill Lane could only be used south to north. East Bank Road was full of signals units awaiting orders and passing messages to active units.

Overnight on June 4-5 the soldiers and their vehicles vanished as they set off for the French beaches.

### 10. The War Memorial.

The war took its toll - Brockenhurst, then a village of just over 2,000 people, suffered the loss of some 40 dead, the youngest serviceman being 17 years old. The War Memorial records the names of the 31 local men who died during 1939-45 war and nine civilians killed.

This leaflet was first produced for Brockenhurst's 60th commemoration of the D-Day landings and has been revised and updated.

With thanks to local historians John Purkess, John Wingham and author David Bennett. © 2024 Brockenhurst Heritage.