

NEW BUCKENHAM

REMEMBERED



Childhood memories of growing
up in the 1940's

By David Seville

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New Buckenham, in the early 1940's, was quite different from the village in which we live today. Memory across that span of time plays tricks and it is difficult to create a mental snapshot, which is correct in every detail. The most important factor was that the community was agriculturally based. Those who were not farmworkers were engaged in serving those who were. Very few commuted outside the village.

The fingers of agriculture penetrated to the heart of the village. Many of the buildings now converted to dwellings were then alive with animals or packed with hay or straw. The buildings on the corner near the cemetery, which you pass on the way to the new village hall, were full of Mr. Powell's pigs. Opposite, where St. Martin's Gardens have been built, was a meadow on which Mrs. Blair, the doctor's wife kept her ponies.



CHAPEL STREET, NEW BUCKENHAM

The doctor lived in St. Mary's, with an extensive garden and orchard upon which St. Mary's Close now stands. I recall that the ripe plums, hanging over the wall to Chapel Street, could easily be encouraged to fall into our youthful hands.

I was born in number one Chapel Street, one of a row of three cottages, since demolished to make way for the George car park. Opposite, on the corner of the Market Place, stood the Smith's house and garage. At the end nearer the George, lived Mr. Smith senior and his wife, whilst the other was occupied by his son Armine and his wife. Along Chapel Street was a range of outbuildings from one of which he dispensed paraffin. At the end next to where Derek Bush lives now, was a large, twin-gabled timber garage, which generally housed two, and on occasions three red double-decker buses.

Round on the Market Place frontage was a single hand-cranked petrol pump. I think this was the



only working pump in the village dispensing petrol to those privileged few who were entitled to it in those war years. Two pumps stood in front of the workshop building in Queen Street but I don't recall them being used. This workshop was at the end of a bicycle and hardware shop owned by Mr. Fox, hence the name "Foxes". Mr. Fox himself lived across the road at Holly Lodge.

Other shops in the village included those of Mr. Tofts, presently Lovells, and Mr. Davy, now Naylor's Pine, which were both grocers and general stores. Mr and Mrs Read were on the corner opposite the vicarage. They were both very deaf and as a consequence suffered greatly at the hands of us children. Mr Claxton was a chemist in King Street in the premises which later became Sesames. Mr. Fiddy had a sweetshop in the Market Place, next to the Smiths, selling such tempting things as liquorice whorls and sherbet. Mr. Peake was a clock and watch repairer in the house where the Routledges live now.

Mr. Kemp and Mr. Goulder were bakers. Mr. Powell and Mr. Myhill were butchers, each slaughtering his own meat. Mr. Smith was a greengrocer with his shop on the Green, whilst Will Symonds combined this with wet and fried fish. Whilst the former delivered by horse and cart, the latter had a small blue van for his rounds which it was firmly believed had never been in top gear in the whole of its working life. His premises were on the corner opposite the chapel and included a timber structure for smoking bloaters.

Water was from two pumps, one in the Market Place and one on Chapel Hill, where the post can still be seen. It was one of the daily chores to carry buckets of water home for drinking and cooking. Wells and water butts supplemented the supply. There were two shoe repairers, Mr. Robins in King Street and my father in Chapel Street. The former was also the village barber whilst father combined his snobbing with a post round at Carleton Rode which required him to cycle twenty-seven miles every day.

Of course we had none of the modern amenities which are taken so much for granted today. Cooking was carried out on kitchen ranges or in oil ovens. Lighting was by oil lamp or candle, the paraffin being obtained from the garage or shops. Wireless sets were powered by large dry-cell batteries and accumulators, which had to be taken regularly to Chapel Hill, where Hubert and Wilfred Saunders charged them at the end of their lean-to workshop.



The earth closets, long before the days of the night cart, were dealt with, in the dead of night, by groups of neighbours.

Milk was delivered, by horse and cart, by Mr. Coleman, from Old Buckenham, and Mr. Frost, from Carleton Rode. Newspapers arrived, before midday, from Attleborough, on Harry Ayton's pony and trap.

Also in the village, we had a vicar, the Rev. Gilleland, a solicitor, Mr. Clowes and a vet, Mr. Holl. Mrs. Feltham was the schoolteacher, Arthur Reeve, the blacksmith, Mrs. Aldous, the postmistress and Mr. Elsdon, the policeman. At the George was Mr. Robinson and at the King's Head, Mr. Rattley whilst Mr. Rush kept the Wine Cellars. Here there was an extensive cellar, and it was here that we, as children, would seek refuge during air raids, for these were the middle years of the war.

The village had been prepared and ready for Adolf and his forces of evil for a long time. The four empty cottages standing at the Town's End and facing across the Common had their windows sand-bagged and the adjoining road had sockets for the rapid assembly of a barbed wire entanglement. The main eoad was flanked by poles down both sides to prevent gliders and aircraft from landing. There was an Observer Corps emplacement beside the Spittlemere, and, like many a villager, my father's bedroom cupboard contained a rifle, greatcoat and the other paraphernalia of the Homeguard.

. And then came the Americans. Quickly Norfolk became part of a giant aircraft carrier. We were surrounded by "fields" as they called them; Old Buckenham, Deopham, Snetterton Heath, Tibenham and Hethel, each with its bomb group of B24 Liberators or B17 Flying Fortresses.

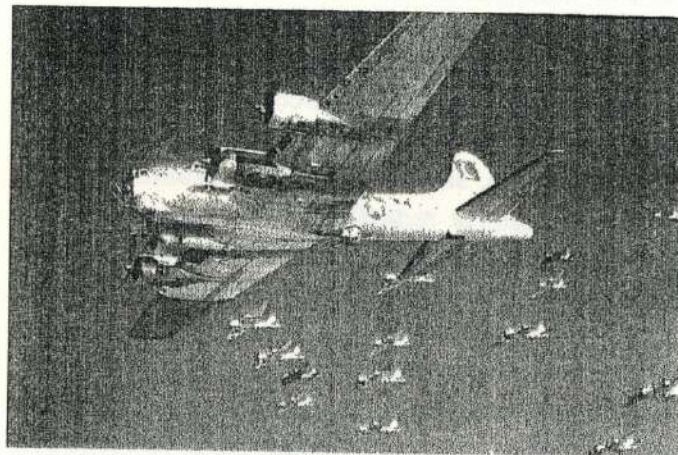
And there were the secret goings on at Fersfield which led to the tragic death of Joe Kennedy, older brother of John, later to become President of the United States. But that's another story.

It is, perhaps true to say that the 19th of May 1944 was one of the most significant dates in the recent history of the village. It would not be overstating it to suggest that, had things turned out differently, much of the village could have been obliterated.

The day started for me in an unexceptional manner. Breakfast had been a bowl of "Farmers Glory" and at ten to nine I walked up Chapel Street from my home next to the George with other children to the schoolyard. Mr. Tofts was in his shop on the corner, and delicious smells of newly baked bread wafted from Mr. Kemp's bakehouse. Across the Market Place came the ringing sound of hammer on metal, as Mr. Reeve tailored a horseshoe to suit a massive carthorse in the forge. I was just nine and the children were a mixture of local villagers and evacuees.

For almost a year we had been accustoming ourselves to the impact which the ever-increasing presence of the 8th. Army Airforce was having on our lives. The early morning awakening to the sound of Liberator engines being run up at Old Bucken-

ham and the vapour-trails being chalked across the high blue winter skies as morning after morning bomber groups formed up and moved to their assembly points over the North Norfolk coast.



. On that particular morning a maximum-effort force of nearly 600 Flying Fortresses was assembling for a long haul raid on Berlin. The 452nd. Bomb Group, based at Deopham was to form part of this force and amongst the B17's, dragging their loads of five one thousand-pound bombs and maximum fuel into the sky was one flown by Lt. William C. Gaither. Following his mid-morning take off he climbed steadily, seeking a slot in the one hundred strong combat wing. Meanwhile, a few miles to the south, 2nd. Lt. Donald G. Salles had flown his B17G off from Nettishall and was form-

ing up at 18,000 feet as lead aircraft in the low squadron of the 388th. Group

Far below, morning playtime was over and Kenny, Richard, Horace Peter, Valerie and the others, myself amongst them, were in Miss Merle's class in the back classroom. I was sitting in the middle of the front row of desks and for some reason, which I can't recall, Sheila had been called out to the front. The steady drone of aircraft overhead was receding when, suddenly a terrific explosion shook the building. In a well-rehearsed routine we all dived under our desks. I squeezed myself to one side to make room for Sheila, and she crawled in beside me.

High above New Buckenham, Gaither had continued his climb until at 11.10am. the port side propellers of Salles' aircraft, flying in formation above, had sliced through the fuselage of his B17 just forward of the tailplane. The entire tailplane was severed and the Fortress went into a loop and then fell into a spin. Three of the one thousand pound bombs detached themselves whilst the other two remained in the crashing aircraft together with its full load of fuel and ammunition.

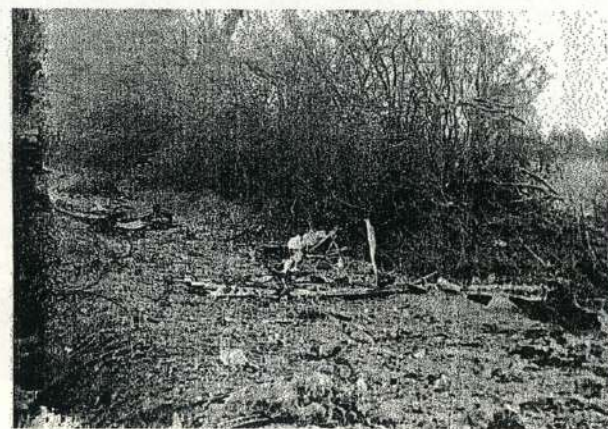
As we crouched under our desks there was a second explosion followed by the sound of igniting ammunition. Outside, parachutes and debris could be seen dropping out of the sky. Jeeps and rescue vehicles were on the spot almost immediately.

When, at dinnertime, we were released to view the scene, it became clear how close we had all come

to disaster. The rear turret, which had become detached from the tailplane, had fallen on the Common, roughly where the children's slide is now.

We found the tailplane in Folly Lane. It had flattened the old metal railings of the cemetery, just around the corner from the entrance gates. The fin stood tall in its surroundings and I recall gashing my knee on a jagged piece of the broken fuselage as I crawled inside. A kindly U.S.A.A.F. medic dabbed the wound with a capsule of Iodine, which he took from his bag.

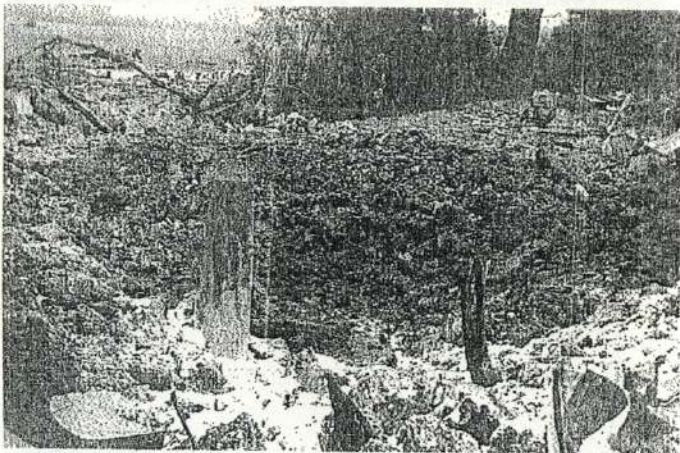
Having derived the maximum excitement from what we had seen so far, we ventured up Folly Lane where we were told the plane itself had crashed. By this time in the war, we had become accustomed to viewing and exploring crashed American aircraft, taking as souvenirs, pieces of Plexiglas or aluminium and, sometimes, live bullets. The full dangers of the situations into which we put ourselves had, till then, not come home to us, but when we came to the crash site halfway along the



straight length of lane beyond where the N. R. A. borehole is located now, we were literally stopped in our tracks.

There was little evidence of an aircraft, save for twisted fragments scattered up and down the lane and across the adjacent fields. Where Folly Lane had been, there was a gaping crater from which protruded one distorted airscrew. The hedges to each side had disappeared, either blown away or incinerated. We stood, round-eyed, and for the first time the shear power and danger of what war represented came fully home to us.

Of the ten-man crew, two, the radio-operator and the top-turret gunner were killed. The waist-gunner received minor injuries. The rest miraculously parachuted to safety. In the other Fortress, Salles at first called for his crew to make ready to bail out, but as the situation stabilised, he found that the plane would still fly and he made an emergency landing at Watton, causing much confusion



and consternation amongst the RAF personnel there.

We should pause for a moment to remember those two young men who had come 3000 miles to fight beside us in those dark days, and who died here in our village. George Williams the top-turret gunner, was, at forty, the oldest member of the crew. Ironically, he had been a member of a barnstorming circus before the war, but on that day his luck ran out. Opening his parachute too soon it snagged on the crashing aircraft and he was dragged to oblivion. Ed Sullivan had been flying as a replacement for the crew's regular operator. The day before, he had learned that he had become a father, and a pair of white baby's shoes had hung from his radio. Like many a crewman he had delayed clipping on his uncomfortable oxygen mask for as long as possible. It may have been as a result of the drowsy state, which this induced or for another reason but Ed was found with his parachute still unopened.

That was all long ago. Almost fifty years have gone by and, perhaps we should reflect on how lucky we are to live in the peaceful times of today, with all our modern amenities, and in such a lovely village as New Buckenham.
