



The North East of England in Wartime

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The Home Front

The Centre has a substantial collection of Home Front recollections and memorabilia, including personal experiences of wartime life in the North East of England. A detailed memoir can be found in our Civilians' War section, by [Vincent Harrison](#), a young boy growing up in a mining village. Here, we also are pleased to display shorter extracts from the papers of a student teacher, a housewife and a young boy from Whitley Bay.

Edward Cartner was born in December 1939 and spent his early years in Morpeth and Whitley Bay in Northumberland. His father was a Police Constable and then Police Detective Sergeant, and the first school Edward attended was a primary school close to the sea at Whitley Bay. Here he recalls his wartime years in Whitley Bay:

We lived in a terrace house opposite the police station and I played in the station yard where I remember deserters in custody shouting through the cell windows for me to run errands. Occasionally our teachers would take us the short distance to the cliff top to cheer British submarines making their way on the surface to Blyth six miles to the north. During one of these sessions I have a clear memory of an aviator descending by parachute from a considerable height. We cheered him as well.

By the end of 1944 I was being walked to infant school - just under a mile - passing the ruins of a large church and several terrace houses destroyed by a land mine. The church organ seemed to be perched on top of the fallen masonry.

Close behind our house was a battery of anti-aircraft artillery, a part of the Tyne defences. The din was horrendous. One night I was hustled by my aunt to shelter under the metal table kept in the kitchen. A German aircraft passed very low directly over the street. I recall my father telling my mother that shortly after, it was destroyed over the sea by a British aircraft.

I created something of a panic by returning home one day carrying a 'bomb'. My father hurried across from the police station and I was carefully escorted there still carrying the thing. I now know it to have been a spent 20mm aircraft cannon shell.

Probably between VE and VJ Day - because we were then allowed to walk beside the beach - an American 'Flying Fortress' flew extremely low over the promenade and did



Wartime cookery book from the papers of Mrs S F Atkinson, donated by her son, Bryan Atkinson.



a 'beat up' of the crowd. I always said that it was so low that I could clearly see the tail gunner's face as he grinned at the screaming people. To celebrate the end of the war - probably VE Day - we had a street party. Our contribution to the flags was a red, white and blue affair with 'God Save the King' printed over it in large letters. We had received from an uncle who was serving with the Eighth Army in Italy a red tin box full of almonds. Of course I did not know what they were, and they weren't a patch on rations, but we had the tin in the family until at least the 1960s. On a day visit to Hexham I puzzled over my father's grave conversation with friends. They seemed to be talking about a single bomb of some sort which had destroyed a Japanese city. I have a clear memory on that sunny day of their solemn faces.

Dorothy Gregory was born in Sunderland and the family moved to Jarrow in 1935:

Our school was evacuated and took over a large country house - I loved it - being with girls of my own age all the time and being made a prefect meant we had our own prefects' sitting room. For months the war seemed to be at a standstill on the home front so the school returned home, then the air raids started. We had a brick-built air raid shelter which was cold and bleak so we spent most air raids on a mattress in an inside passage which hadn't any windows or outside walls.

I applied for, and was accepted for nursing training. My father was horrified at the idea of his daughter nursing or being in the forces and decided I must teach, as student teachers were exempt from national service. I decided I would do domestic science as I enjoyed cooking, so my father made up his mind that I must go to the Newcastle college, which was evacuated to Berwick-on-Tweed. As he had to pay the fees and I wasn't used to dissenting, I went. We had to wear uniform for cooking and laundrywork, very smart, very expensive, individually tailored in the French dressmaking department of one of the large stores in Newcastle. The starched collars were very uncomfortable, scratching the neck. Overalls were used for housewifery and chemistry. This saved our own clothes but as everything was on coupons it meant we had none left for personal clothing. We also had to supply all our knives and other cutlery used in cookery classes.

We all had to do our share of firewatching overnight in the old grammar school and did some training with the ARP service - I particularly remember crawling through a smoke-filled hut in readiness to face gas attacks. We all took the St John Ambulance first aid and home nursing courses and were enrolled in the WI and WVS. This was not for our pleasure, we didn't go to the normal meetings but it was so that we could take our share of voluntary wartime activities. We took our turn manning the forces



Recipe for a 'Berlin Sandwich' from the papers of Mrs S F Atkinson, donated by her son, Bryan Atkinson.



canteen on the station platform - mainly Saturday and Sunday afternoons and when we were sufficiently proficient we went out in pairs to local WIs, also church groups to demonstrate wartime cookery. Saturdays we were expected to sell flags for good causes and there weren't many Saturdays without a flag day.

During the long summer holidays we occasionally had to team up with Ministry of Food demonstrators and go to places such as Marks and Spencer and hospital outpatient departments to demonstrate wartime cookery. Also we were expected to do three weeks voluntary war work. In the first year we weren't considered to be sufficiently trained to cook so I remember going to a camp to help to clear the land of brambles and other bushes, because farmers had to bring more and more land into production. Then I spent three weeks in a day nursery where women doing war work could leave their babies and children up to five years of age. We were open from 7am to 6pm. Three weeks in my last year were spent cooking in a small maternity home where I replaced the cook who was on holiday.

In the last year of the war Dorothy, together with other volunteers from domestic science colleges, was sent to London to cook for builders involved in the reconstruction of the City. It was:

a great experience in large-scale cookery. I remember frying 20-24 eggs at a time. When we could, we spent our free time exploring London and standing "in the Gods" to see West End shows. The doodlebugs and rockets didn't worry us as much as they must have worried our parents.

Even today I am horrified at the idea of wasting food, partly because as a child I was taught to eat up and I can remember soon after starting college one student being made to re-peel her potato peelings as she'd taken off too thick a peeling - it taught us all a lesson. I do also remember often wishing there was a little more to eat. I find it difficult to discard clothes while there is any wear left in them, and still "make do and mend".

Doreen Parratt

I was born in Scarborough in June 1922. My father, Captain A P Harmer RNVR, had come out of the First World War shell-shocked and my mother ran a small, elegant and very successful hotel in the very centre of Scarborough.

At the age of 16 Doreen applied for a job as a Parlour maid at the home of Lord and Lady McKinnon in Buckinghamshire;

I had to serve at table, lay the table, keep the dining room in order, Dinner was prompt at 8pm and everyone dressed for Dinner whether there were visitors or not.



Doreen Parratt

Doreen then returned to Scarborough to help her mother in the hotel. There were three men resident in the hotel, one of whom,



Tom Parratt, would become Doreen's future husband, and all three men worked in the local Tax Office.

Mother still cooked and shopped but she had lost heart and war was threatening. I collected our gas masks, they were handed out at a school in North Marine Road and in the school yard was a gas van. It was simply filled with gas and having been given your gas mask you could then put it on and try it out. I went through, but can't say it left much impression on me. Mother took one look at her gas mask and said "Well I'll never put that on".

In May 1939 Doreen's mother died, which meant that Doreen had to find a new home and a new job at just 16. She started work at Anderson and Flintoff, a shop on the main street of Scarborough. When war broke out, the shop immediately sold out of heavy curtain material as the blackout took effect.

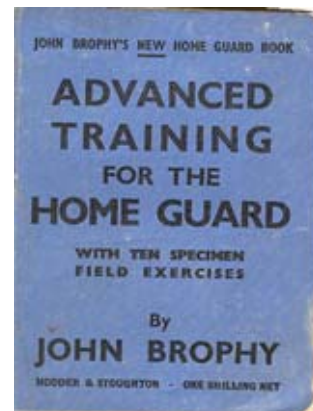
We younger people just wondered what would happen next. We were soon to know. Our world went dark, no street lights and walking up paths became a hazard. Food shops emptied their shelves. Petrol was soon to go. The boys at work began to get their calling up papers and one by one they all went. I soon became the only young person left in the whole building. The winter dragged on. It was bitterly cold with no heating at home or at work. I now moved to the Peel's small council house, three miles out of Scarborough. I couldn't afford the bus fare which was 3d each way, so I walked.

Doreen recalled clearly the sense of shock throughout the country when British troops were evacuated at Dunkirk. Then:

Just before the end of June 1940, Tom came to see me at the shop and told me he had to move to the Sunderland Valuation office. We decided to marry straightaway and go together. Air raids were starting to happen quite frequently now. Generally people abided by the instructions in true British fashion and on hearing the sirens went patiently down to the nearest basements, once a woman started screaming but that was a rare occasion. We found a small, beautifully furnished bungalow for 2 guineas a week. People were leaving the city centres now as fast as they could. Tom joined the Local Defence Volunteers but firewatching at the Valuation Office had to take priority. The top floor was the telephone exchange, the next floor was the Valuation Office and below that Government offices such as Taxes. It was heavily banked up with sandbags and a Military Guard was on duty around it. You had to state your reason for entry.

Tom and Doreen settled happily into life in Sunderland;

From the outbreak of war the shipyards were working flat out, torpedoed ships were coming in for repair and new ships were being ordered for the Navy and for the oil companies. Shipyard workers came off duty too



Home Guard manual donated by Mrs D Parratt



tired to wash or change their clothes; the tram seats were black with grime. The colliers were working day and night. All around us now the miners were bringing home more money than they had had for years.

Despite more available work opportunities, shortages were taking their toll:

Fruit and vegetables were very scarce, we had plenty of milk, potatoes, leeks and rhubarb, anything local, but nothing from the fruit areas of Kent or the West Country. The situation became explosive and the Mayor of Sunderland went down to Whitehall while the Sunderland Echo was printing headlines about the "starving North East". It didn't get much better but at least everyone knew the problem was recognised. On the other hand, we always had plenty of coal. For friendship and warmth there was no shortage whatsoever. Mrs Robson lived in a house along Roker Park, a most beautiful house they bought off the film producer George Black. The Robsons were wealthy timber merchants, and had a big contract to supply all the telegraph poles for the North East. They had a walled garden at the back and grew many vegetables and strawberries - we went out to the garden one summer evening and were all allowed to pick one strawberry each. That was the only strawberry I had for five years. I went to Mrs Robson's knitting party every Wednesday evening; we knitted long oil-proofed seaman's socks. When we got a large tea chest full, we sent it off and got another load of wool sent to us. There was plenty of accommodation - as the raids increased more people left. I was asked to do voluntary work at the YMCA canteen which was open 24 hours a day supplying meals and tea for members of the Forces. I did 11am to 3pm and we cooked about 80 dinners every day, also serving tea and sandwiches as well. We worked in the old Victoria Hall until one day they discovered there was an unexploded bomb underneath and we moved to the YMCA building in Fawcett Street. We watched Binns, the big store, burn after a fire bomb attack, the railway station was hit and many small houses. I woke up in the middle of a later raid when the searchlights were sweeping the sky. I dressed and put my tin hat on and ran for the nearest Anderson shelter next door. There was a horrible smell in the air which I later learnt was earth. A land mine had dropped onto a small shop in Fulwell and there had been a lot of damage that night; a list of dead was put up on the Town Hall doors. Tom was allowed to join the Home Guard. He joined the East Boldon Group on the condition that the office defence still took priority. His first uniform was stiff and impregnated with powdered lime, this was supposed to be an antidote to gas, however use and wear seemed to slowly get rid of it.

East Boldon was a small village a couple of miles north of Seaburn, there was a colliery and all the local recruits were miners, they were tough, short, stocky men, devoted and truly loyal to their colliery. Tom was soon given 'one pip' and became Lieutenant and had his own platoon. Men turned up as and when their work allowed. Comradeship was a way of life with them, humour replaced genteel manners and the many humorous situations plus a few swear words kept the atmosphere going. On exercises one Sunday morning Tom nearly lost an ear. One of his men swung round quickly, with bayonet fixed, and Tom escaped with a small cut on the back of his ear. They had a medic, an old boy, but he was so grubby himself they all swore they



wouldn't want him near them. Even so, they were fighters and ammunition was coming through now. We kept 6 hand grenades and Tom's rifle under the stairs in a cupboard; I was shown how to use them just in case.

The work at the YMCA canteen went on ceaselessly. The men we served were mainly seamen, waiting for their ships to be repaired or waiting for new ships to be finished and ready to sail. Men came back with stories of the Russian women working on the docks at Archangel to keep the harbour open, smashing and removing the ice as strongly as men would have done. As we peeled potatoes and made chips we marvelled at the Russian womenfolk. A big, tall, heavy-looking man called me to the end of the counter one day and very embarrassingly asked in a quiet voice, could we make him a bowl of bread and milk? He'd been out on a raft for many days before being picked up and his digestion couldn't take anything else. We were more than happy to oblige.

One of the volunteers who regularly peeled potatoes with me used to bring her son's letters in for us all to read. He was fighting up Italy and had been a schoolteacher in Sunderland before call-up. He was taking advantage of seeing all Italy's historic treasures and wrote telling us all about seeing Rome and Florence after fighting all through the North African desert. Another letter said how our lads played races with the lizards and then tested the lizards' power of changing colours by putting them onto various Scottish tartans to see what they made of that.



Officers of the East Boldon Home Guard. Tom Parratt back row, second from right.

Royal Air Force

In September 2003 we are pleased to include the personal experiences of [Sgt Ernie Reynolds](#) of Bomber Command, who was interviewed by Colin Bailey, one of our volunteers, in October 2002.

We have also kindly been given the following details by our volunteer, John Larder, who has a special interest in the RAF, of a few of the men from the North East of England who served with the RAF during the war and who sadly lost their lives.

F/O Henry Elderfield (known to his wife as Harry) was the pilot of Lancaster ED784 from 50 Sqn which attacked the Skoda Works at Pilsen. The aircraft force-landed in the sea, six miles off the coast of France. Out of the crew of eight, two were drowned. The remainder reached the dinghy which was damaged and unable to take all the crew. Harry swam towards



Eston War Memorial near Middlesbrough.



the shore to find help but was lost. The dinghy was found and the crew rescued by a MTB after 22 hours adrift. Harry is commemorated on the Runnymede Memorial and the Eston War Memorial near Middlesbrough.

F/O Arthur Peter Pease served during the Battle of Britain. He was the son of Sir Richard and Lady Pease of Middleton Tyas. Arthur joined Cambridge University Air Squadron and after training, was posted to No 1 School of Army Co-operation at Old Sarum. He was then posted to 5 OTU at Aston Down to convert to Spitfires and from there to 603 Sqn at Dyce. Arthur shot down a He111 on 30 July 1940 and destroyed a Bf109 on 3 September 1940. Just four days later he was forced to belly-land due to damage inflicted on his aircraft and on 15 September he was shot down. Arthur Pease is buried in the family grave at Middleton Tyas Churchyard.

Sgt Henry Albert Bolton also served during the Battle of Britain. He joined the RAF in July 1939, completed his training by July 1940 and just one month later, Henry was killed while trying to force land at the age of 21. He is buried at Hartlepool Cemetery.

F/O Oswald St John Pigg served in the Battle of France and the Battle of Britain. He was educated at Newcastle Grammar School and was the son of Reverend J J Pigg, the Vicar of Chatton, Northumberland. Oswald joined the RAF in March 1937 and was posted to 72 Sqn at Church Fenton on 27 November 1937. On June 2, 1940 he shot down a Ju87 over Dunkirk, then crash-landed, slightly wounding himself, at Gravesend. On 15 August 1940 Oswald shot down a Bf109 but was killed in action 1 September 1940. He is buried in St Oswald's Burial Ground in Durham and has a memorial in St Oswald's Church.

P/O Douglas Cyril Winter also served in the Battle of France and the Battle of Britain. He was born in South Shields and joined the RAF in September 1929 as an apprentice. Douglas passed out as an engine fitter in 1932 but applied, and was accepted for, pilot training. He joined 72 Sqn at Church Fenton and was commissioned in April 1940. In June Douglas destroyed a Ju87 and shared a Do17 near Holy Island. In August he shot down two Bf110s and the following month a Bf109. Douglas was shot down 5 September 1940 and is buried at South Shields Cemetery.

F/Sgt Robert Hall served in the Battle of Britain. Little is known about Robert apart from the fact that he came from Felling. He served as an air gunner with 29 Sqn, then retrained as an Observer and was killed in an accident in a Beaufighter in October 1941. Robert is buried at Heworth Cemetery, Felling.

P/O Edward Valley served in the Battle of Normandy. He was the pilot of Typhoon JR527 and his aircraft was damaged in an attack on a radar site at Jerbourg. A native of Billingham, Edward is buried at Bayeux Cemetery in Normandy. He is one of two possible pilots who deliberately crashed his damaged aircraft into the radar station to prevent its use, on 24 May 1944.

S/L John Sample was born in Morpeth in 1913 and was a Flight Commander in 1939, having joined 607 Sqn Auxiliary Airforce. In France, in May 1940, he shot down a He111 but was then forced to bail out. For his action in France, he was awarded the DFC in June. Between May 1940 and March 1941 John claimed a Do17 and shared a He111. In September 1941 he



was posted to form 137 Sqn flying Whirlwinds but was killed the following month after a collision with another Whirlwind. John is buried in St Andrews Church, Bothal, Ashington in Northumberland.

One of the North East of England RAF servicemen who survived the war is:

Group Captain Denys Edgar Gillam DSO, DFC*, AFC** who was born in Tyneside in 1915. He obtained his flying licence in 1934 and joined the RAF the following year. In June 1938, Denys received the AFC for flying food to Rathlin Island in very hazardous conditions. During the Battle of Britain he served with 616 Sqn very successfully, was awarded the DFC in November 1940 and then the Bar to the DFC in October 1941. The following month Denys was shot down by flak and picked up by Air Sea Rescue Launch off Dunkirk and in December was awarded the DSO. March 1942 saw him forming the first Typhoon Wing at Duxford and subsequently taking command of 20 Sector 2nd TAF in April 1944. In August 1944 Denys was awarded the Bar to his DSO and in October of that year he led an attack on the German Staff Conference at Dordrecht which killed many of the senior staff of the 15th Army. Denys was awarded the second bar to his DSO in January 1945 and left the RAF later that year. Post-war he was Director and Chairman of Homfray Carpets in Halifax and Deputy Lord Lieutenant of North Yorkshire, before his death in 1991. Denys was widely held to be one of the greatest exponents of the potential of the Typhoon.

In the North East during the **Battle of Britain** there were two attacks by Luftflotte 5. The first attack involved 65 He111 and 34 Me110 which were intercepted over the Farne Islands by 72 Sqn from Acklington. The German forces were split; some were attacked close to Acklington by 79 Sqn and a flight from 605 Sqn and the others were caught near Sunderland by 607 Sqn and 41 Sqn. 8 He111 and 7 Me110 were shot for no loss to the RAF.

In the second attack 50 Ju88s were discovered off Flamborough Head by 616 Sqn and 73 Sqn. In the ensuing battle 6 Ju88s were shot down for no loss, although some German aircraft damaged houses and an ammunition dump at Scarborough, and others continued to Driffield aerodrome, where 4 hangars were hit and 10 Whitleys destroyed on the ground.

Middleton St George airfield, now Teeside Airport, was the most northerly airfield used by any Bomber Group. It was used by 78 Sqn flying Halifaxes from April to October 1941 and June to September 1942. Between June 1941 and September 1942 it was also home to 76 Sqn. From October 1942, 420 Sqn was based at Middleton St George with 419 Sqn and later 428 Sqn.

Usworth Airfield was home to 64 Sqn from May 1940, flying Spitfires, then 43 Sqn on Hurricanes as well as 607 Sqn flying Gladiators.

The Army

The Website displays good examples of personal experiences from infantrymen in the North East of England Regiments, including the Green Howards and the Durham Light Infantry. [James Bostock](#) and [Joe Kelley](#) both served with the DLI in North Africa and Joe's memoir is particularly vivid regarding the invasion of Sicily. The site also features the experiences of [Stanley Palmer](#) of the Green Howards who served in North Africa. [Denis Swinney](#) of the



The Second World War Experience Centre
Reproduction of an article from the Centre's website
<http://www.war-experience.org/history/keyaspects/northeast/default.asp>

Royal Engineers was born in Morpeth, served as part of the BEF and was taken prisoner in North Africa.

The Royal Navy

As part of the Centre's feature on the North East of England we are pleased to include the memories of [Lt Derric Breen](#) who served on board *HMS Egret* during the Battle of the Atlantic, then on Harbour Defence Motor Launches as Air Sea Rescue before joining *HMS Pict* as part of Freetown Escort Force.

Useful Links

There are a number of useful sites which give information on the role of the North East of England during the Second World War. If you have a site which you feel could be included here, please contact cath.pugh@war-experience.org

www.acia.co.uk Aviation archaeology in Northern England – NEEACR

www.northallertonmemorials.org.uk/ Northallerton Memorials Project

www.bbc.co.uk/englandonfilm information on the Home Front in the North East of England and film clips

www.neam.org.uk the North East Aircraft Museum in Sunderland

www.durham.gov.uk Durham County Council Information Service

www.westallswar.org.uk an Air Raid disaster in North Shields.

Information regarding Regimental Museums in the North East of England can be found at www.armymuseums.org.uk