




THE RED FEATHER CLUB MUSEUM
IS DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY
OF THE 95TH BOMBARDMENT GROUP (H)
USAAF 8TH AIR FORCE
WHO SERVED WITH HONOUR AND VALOUR
AT HORHAM AIRFIELD (STATION 119)
JUNE 1943 - JUNE 1945

Dark days & holidays

For the 75th anniversary of VE Day, Beccles Museum has created an oral history of the role the town played in defending the nation

WORDS: Mike Trippitt ♦ PHOTOS: Hjhjhjhjhj

You have come to Suffolk, and Suffolk is quite the nicest county in all England. So you are very lucky. You have come to the ancient town of Beccles, and Beccles is one of the nicest towns in the nicest County in all England.”

When local MP Pieter Loftus addressed evacuees at Beccles’ St Benet’s School on December 2, 1939, he was, no doubt, seeking to re-assure them that life in the sleepy market town would be safer than in the bomb-threatened areas of southern England from where the youngsters had come.

Beccles and District Museum volunteer Christine Wheeler says:

“Evacuated children were taught in local schools and lived with ordinary families”

“Evacuees came to Lowestoft by boat from Dagenham mostly, or Gravesend. They came to Beccles at the very beginning of the war by train from Lowestoft and were taken to the Public Hall, where they were distributed among those who could take evacuees.”

Long before war broke out in September that year Beccles had been identified as a suitable place for children to go. Their arrival was one of the first signs that the dark days of the Second World War had begun.

Eight decades later, Christine



ABOVE:
Horham Airfield
Museum

LEFT:
Red Feather Club
memorial.

Wheeler has spent six months interviewing 11 residents who remember the war years in Beccles. Their stories were to be part of a special exhibition to mark the 75th anniversary of VE Day, until the museum had to close amid the Coronavirus pandemic. But Christine’s work stands as an invaluable contribution to the town’s oral record of that time.

“I’d been thinking of doing reminiscences for a long time, because I like the concept of oral history,” says Christine. She describes her experience as “fabulous” and says she has learned so much. “I have loved it.

I have got to know these people, and got to know their stories. They are such nice people, real characters.”

In 1939 Beccles’ population of approximately 6,500 began to increase as evacuees arrived and residents’ extended families moved to the town to live in relative safety. Evacuated children were taught in local schools and lived with ordinary families who could accommodate them, though their stay in Beccles did not last long. Once the Luftwaffe targeted Lowestoft – it was bombed 105 times in all – the area was no longer considered suitable, so evacuees were moved ▶



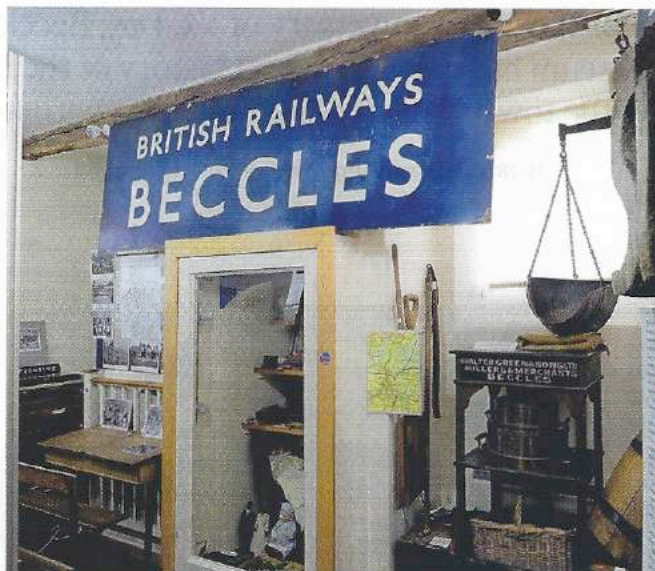
Suffolk at the heart of air defences

From 1939 the East Anglian landscape changed dramatically. In the largest and fastest construction project ever undertaken large swathes of British countryside were given over to airfields. Suffolk was at the heart of this programme, and by 1945 had 32 operational airfields, the majority of them having been built in the war years.

One such base was RAF Beccles, at Ellough, just outside the town. Although it was originally built to accommodate the 8th US Army Air Force, America's heavy bombers were never stationed there. But from 1943, due to it being the most easterly airfield in England, it became a regular landing spot for damaged bombers unable to make it home.

The servicemen and women based at Ellough, and at nearby Bungay and Halesworth, swelled the Beccles' population, and for local youngsters were a noticeable presence in the town and at the railway station. But, says Christine Wheeler, there were also prisoners of war.

"One witness has a clear memory of German prisoners who had been brought into Beccles to get some fish and chips. It was very cold and they were sitting outside the King's Head pub, with their feet on bales of straw to keep their feet warm. They were singing Silent Night. It was very evocative."



to Wales or returned home.

But for children of Beccles in the early 1940s, wartime was all they knew. Fathers who were not away at war carried on their work and acted as firemen and air

It was a gloomy place. There were no lights anywhere, so it was pitch black'

raid wardens in their spare time. Mothers cooked for soldiers billeted in their homes, and those who could, worked making munitions at local engineering company Elliott and Garrod.

Through children's eyes, this was how life was. Blackouts and food restrictions were routine, the small cardboard box housing their gas mask unremarkable. There was no fear amongst them, nor any sense of being in harm's way.

"They thought it was normal. They didn't know anything different," says Christine Wheeler. "They didn't know what it was like not to have rationing." Christine is struck by the absence of bravado or

drama in what she has heard. "They were children, and they're just telling me their stories. Several have said that when the war was over the most significant thing was that they could have sweets."

But for all those recounting their experiences, people now in their eighties and nineties, one vivid memory remains.

"It was very dark," says Christine. "It was a gloomy place. There were no lights anywhere, so it was pitch black." One witness recalls a bus journey from Norwich one evening in fog, when someone had to walk in front of the bus because the driver couldn't see where he was going in the darkness.

For the team at Beccles Museum, piecing together stories and events of the war has not always proved easy. The museum's local press archive, so useful in finding stories relating to the First World War, is less enlightening regarding the second conflict.

Museum curator Alan Wheeler explains. "The papers are very different from the First World War to the Second World War. In World War I they were very specific. They mentioned places, dates, times and people involved, because they weren't worried about spies and the information getting across to the enemy.



"In World War II it was very different. It was very much 'An East Anglian town was bombed yesterday'. And that's all. That's because [the government] was worried about information being used by the enemy."

In contrast, reports from Holidays At Home Week in Beccles during the summer of 1943 are in abundance. Robert Bacon has been researching this national initiative.

"By 1943 troops from all over the empire, and Americans, were beginning to mass here and train for the invasion that would take place a year later," he says.

"In the summer of 1943 the government was very keen that the public should travel as little as possible and should stay at home, in particular in the summer holiday period. It didn't want vast numbers of civilians clogging up the railways, going to resorts, and using up the food and accommodation which was otherwise to be used by troops."

So, local councils were encouraged to arrange a Holidays at Home Week to keep people at home. Beccles adopted this idea, and an organising committee planned an extensive programme of activities from July 31 to August 8. There were dances, drama performances, a fete, a horticultural

show, a cycle ride to Blythburgh, golf tournaments, tennis and bowls competitions, rowing, sailing and canoeing races, and an angling competition on the River Waveney.

Music was a big part of the festivities. Bands from the USAAF, the Royal Marines and The Manchester Regiment gave concerts, and baritone David Price-Williams also performed. An outdoor area of Beccles known as The Dell was transformed into a concert venue.

Organising committee chairman and town mayor Alderman Owles expressed his hope in the preface to the week's official programme:

"And so for a week, let us forget work and give ourselves over entirely to relaxation, laughter and music, so that refreshed in mind and body the task of winning the war maybe renewed with renewed purpose and vigour."

Thousands of local residents took part in the week's events – 500 paid to attend the inaugural concert – and Robert Bacon is in no doubt that Holidays At Home Week was hugely enjoyed and a massive success.

"The impression I have is that it achieved its objective. People had a jolly good time and felt that they had had their holiday." The original staycation. ♦

LEFT:
Beccles Museum

RIGHT:
The 95th Bomb Group Heritage Association has faithfully restored buildings to keep alive the memory of the 95th's role in the Second World War.