

# DISCOVERING BINGHAM

Quarterly NEWSLETTER of the **Bingham Heritage Trails Association**  
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BHTA: Increasing public awareness of our heritage in Architecture, Folk & Natural History, Archaeology & Geology

## **BHTA's project on Bingham in World War Two**

As announced in the June newsletter, BHTA is currently researching the town's part in WW2. Our work on the wartime service and family backgrounds of those named on the 1939-1945 Roll of Honour is revealing a fascinating picture. Not only did Bingham citizens serve in most of the major theatres of the war, some becoming prisoners of war, but they also came from diverse origins. The fallen include members of long-standing Bingham families, as well as men originally hailing from places as far flung as Northampton, Buckinghamshire and Marshall, Texas, USA. An additional WW2 soldier, Gunner Lewis Mead from Nottingham, serving with an anti-aircraft battery at Whatton, died in a road accident in Bingham in 1940 and is buried with a Commonwealth War Graves Commission headstone in the town cemetery. Not being a "Bingham Boy" his name is not on the war memorial.

We have been fortunate to have had the help of family members and others to add to what can be learned from official records and we are keen to contact others with relevant information.

Among the fallen, we hope to learn more about Signalman Herbert Davis, who is buried in a family plot in the town cemetery, along with his father and mother.

We are also trying to

build a picture of the contributions of those from the town who served and returned. This task is complicated by the fact that there is no complete list, comparable with that available for WW1.

We would very much like to hear from members who can help or who can point us to others with information. Among the questions we are interested in are:

Did you have a relative or friend who served in the armed forces in WW2, about whom you have information? Did someone you know serve in the Land Army, the Home Guard or as an ARP warden? Do you have memories of life in Bingham during the war and in the immediate post-war years?

Regular readers of the newsletter may recall an item in our December 2017 issue, reporting on the visit, earlier that year, of a former WW2 refugee, Brenda Cowell. The then Brenda Cook, aged 9, had been evacuated from South London in 1943. She arrived in Bingham, accompanied by her younger sister Betty, aged 7, and carrying her luggage and gas mask, much like the earlier arrivals shown in this photograph.

Brenda and her sister were taken in by Francis (Frank) and Frances Nicholson, who lived in Moor Farmhouse (now 8-10 East Street). They remained in Bingham with "Aunty Frances and Uncle Frank", attending the Church School in what is now Old Church House, until they returned home in 1945

Perhaps you remember Brenda and



Betty, or have recollections of other refugee children in Bingham. Or maybe your own family took in evacuees?

We would love to hear from you if you have family records, photographs and memorabilia of this period in Bingham history that would add to the richness of the story we hope to tell.

If you have information to share, please contact project leader, David Mason, on 01949 876635 or by email via the BHTA website.

### One of our correspondents writes: MY EVACUATION EXPERIENCE

Some of the memories of when I was evacuated from London in the autumn of 1943. I was six. Prior to this our house was bombed; after that we were rehoused in a comparatively safe area. There were still a lot of air raids and we would scamper into the indoor Morrison shelter for our protection. Of course there were still bombings in our new area and later on in the war we saw the buzz bombs. I do recall my eldest brother and I searching the streets for shrapnel, seeing the searchlights scanning the skies at night and hearing anti-aircraft guns. But I must say during this period, I do not remember being afraid, but this was how life was for a child of my age, it was the norm.

On the day of my evacuation, I was completely unaware of the coming event even after having the luggage tag threaded and tied through the buttonhole of my lapel with my name on. My grandmother (we had no mother and our father was at war) took my

middle brother (aged eleven) and myself to White Lane School where there was quite a large crowd of children. There were several London Transport buses which took us to Euston Station, not before my brother was given the instruction that under no circumstances were we to be separated. It was a big responsibility for a boy of his age, for myself, I just accepted the situation, no responsibility, no worries.

On the platform there seemed to be hoards of children in the same situation. I do not recall how the carriages were allocated. Our carriage was the open type with tables between the two rows of seats. Soon the train trundled out of the station, we did not know where we were going; it was rumoured we were going to Wales. The train continued its journey until the evening. We alighted from the train and were taken to a large

hall (where that was I do not know), we were given a meal. I cannot remember what it was except for the mashed potatoes and tinned peas (I hadn't tasted them before). That night we slept on the floor. The following morning we

continued our journey until we reached our destination.

We had arrived at Carnforth (The Brief Encounter Station) and, with the other children, were taken to a hall. Cars ferried children out to their respective billets. Eventually, the time came for the driver to take us; he only knew the names of the children in his care and he would knock on doors and ask the occupants to take an evacuee, selected by name only, without seeing the child. As a pair of evacuees we were the last



to be found a suitable billet. Once in our new home we entered the lounge, my brother sat in an armchair and wept, probably from the responsibility placed on his young shoulders. This confused me and I thought I should weep in sympathy. Mrs Dodding, our new guardian quickly gave us jobs to do to take our minds off feeling sorry for ourselves. Mrs Dodding had a son three weeks older than myself and she took us to collect him from school. It was raining very heavily, very dismal and I remember very distinctly the grey granite blocks which paved the way to school.

We were lucky, very lucky. Mr. and Mrs. Dodding, our guardians, were kind, responsible people. I had a wonderful time there in the beautiful countryside with frequent visits to Morecombe Bay. The food was lovely, especially her Hotpot and Ginger Bread. The duration of my stay was approximately eighteen months. I do not remember all the events that happened, just the few above mentioned ones.

We have already made contact with one or two families whose relatives' names are either on the war memorial or on the list we have of soldiers returning from the war. Their stories make interesting reading and make the few bare facts from our research come alive. Two such stories are told here.

### **Operation Mincemeat**

William Matthews, born in Mansfield on November 29<sup>th</sup> 1920, was the son of Police Constable Robert Matthews. In that role, he was moved around the county and by 1939 had been posted to Bingham, where he and the family lived on Grantham Road. Promoted to sergeant the family moved to Oak Villa in Long Acre East in the early 1940s. William interrupted his training as a

quantity surveyor to join the army and finally passed the RICS Special Ex-Service Examination in Land Agency in August 1948. On March 31<sup>st</sup> 1943 William married Joan Eleanor Nicholson in Bingham where they took up residence in Fairfield Street. Joan's father was Garnet Nicholson, a school attendance officer and noted local photographer. William was already a



sapper with the Royal Engineers and just a few days later his unit was posted abroad. By November he was a prisoner of war in Austria.

In July 1943 units of the Royal Engineers took part in the Operation Barclay landings in Greece, a

subsidiary part of Operation Mincemeat, the brainchild of Ian Fleming. British Intelligence had planted documents on a fake corpse that gave misleading information to the Germans. Part of the story was that a (fictitious) 12<sup>th</sup> army was going to invade Greece in 1943. The Germans moved substantial numbers of troops away from Italy to meet the supposed threat and thus the actual invasion of Italy was made that much easier. Matthews took part in the pretend invasion of Greece (Operation Barclay) that was 'disclosed' in Operation Mincemeat. He was reported missing on 16<sup>th</sup> November 1943.

In June 1945 William was welcomed home with a party for 80 guests at Garnet Nicholson's house in Fairfield Street. William eventually reached a senior position with the National Coal Board and he and Joan bought a house on High Street Bottesford which remained the family home for many

years. When William retired from the NCB he took employment on a contract for a Geothermal Power Station in the Rift Valley in Kenya. He said that they were some of the best days of his life. Like many other returning soldiers he did not talk much about his experiences until much later in life. He said that his comrades had known that they would not be rescued from Greece and that they would all either be killed or become prisoners of war. He told his son the he was not to be thought of as a hero, he was just doing his job.

### Prisoner of the Japanese

Thomas Smith was born in Bingham in 1906 and in 1939 was living in one of the recently built council houses in Stanhope Way. He was married with a son and daughter and was employed as a labourer on public works contracts. His father, George, worked at the steam mill in Station Street and lived with his family in the Mill Cottage next door.



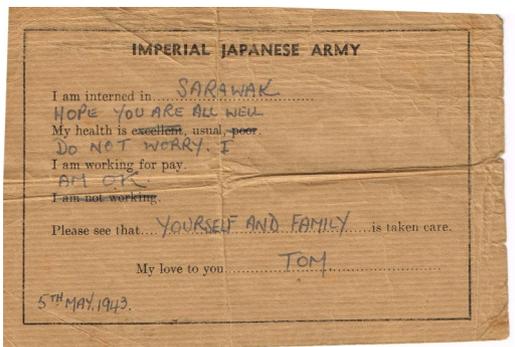
He joined the 48th Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, a Royal Artillery Territorial unit established in November 1940. In February 1942 it was deployed to Java. It was a component of the 16th Anti-Aircraft Brigade armed with Bofors 40

mm. It comprised the 49<sup>th</sup>, 95<sup>th</sup>, and 242nd Batteries. Each unit was assigned to cover a specific infantry unit.

The Japanese invaded Borneo on 13<sup>th</sup> December 1941. On 19<sup>th</sup> January 1942 British North Borneo was surrendered by Governor Charles Smith, who was interned with other staff. Fighting continued until allied troops surrendered on 1st April 1942.

Japan surrendered on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1945. Thomas died of severe malnutrition in Garut, Java four days later.

His daughter and grandson have twice visited the grave in Labuan War Cemetery, Labuan Island (in Brunei Bay off NW Borneo coast), Malaysia. They still have a number of post cards from him, saying he was well and usefully employed (this would have been building runways and work in the jungle).



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