

## DORNEY IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Like many rural places, Dorney was liable to receive occasional damage from stray bombs. Thanks to an excellent comprehensive listing on the website of the Centre for Buckinghamshire studies, we know that bombs fell on or near Dorney on four separate occasions during the war.

The first occasion was on 2 October 1940. Six separate bombs fell – one between Huntercombe Manor and Burnham Abbey, one near Climo's Corner, and four around the sewage farm. No damage was recorded. Later that month, between 26 and 28 October, bombs hit Amerden Priory, West Town Farm and the Bath Road near the top of Marsh Lane. These caused serious damage to houses and cables, but fortunately no casualties.

A few days later, on the night of 1/2 November, the sewage farm was hit again, causing damage to cottages, windows and stables. The same night, West Town Farm was also hit again, damaging windows and leaving an unexploded bomb. Another bomb fell near Huntercombe Lane South, causing slight damage to a bungalow. Finally, a high explosive and three unexploded bombs landed in Boveney, with no damage reported.

It was three and a half years before Dorney again experienced the terror of falling bombs. On 31 March 1944, bombs fell near Elm Farm on the common, breaking windows. One of these bombs fell on Air Ministry ground, which brings me to one of the more dramatic effects of the war for Dorney. A stretch of land on the east side of the common, alongside Roundmoor Ditch and south of road to Eton Wick, was taken over for use by a heavy anti-aircraft gun battery, known as Dorney Camp. As well as the gun emplacements, there was accommodation and catering for the Air Force and ATS personnel in a series of Nissen huts. The camp was set up in June 1940 and was occupied until the end of the war, the huts being finally removed in 1950. Eton Wick's history group website has some good photos of the camp as well as a map. A former resident of Eton Wick recalls on the website the flashes and the searchlights from the guns at night. The site is now a listed monument.

A memorial board in Dorney Church records the deaths of 12 men during the war. Not all of these show an immediate connection with Dorney – quite a few seem to have come from Taplow – but two definitely lived in the village, and their stories illustrate the impact of the war on individual families.

Richard Vernon Cholmondeley came from an old English middle-class family, but he was actually born in Australia, where his parents had emigrated to run a vineyard. His father died in 1918, and his mother seems to have returned to her family home in Welshpool, although the family retained ownership of the vineyard and appear to have travelled out to Australia from time to time. Richard was educated in England at Haileybury College, and as a young man was variously recorded as an engineer and a secretary. In 1936, he married Margaret Fry at St Margaret's, Westminster, and by 1938 the young couple had settled into Old Pond House in Dorney. I believe they had two young daughters. In 1939, Margaret was living in Old Pond House with her children, and volunteering as an ambulance driver.

However, Richard was said to be in Australia – perhaps at the family business - when he joined up in 1939. He became a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant in the Royal Scots Fusiliers, which sailed to France in October 1939 as part of the British Expeditionary Force. In April 1940, he was put in charge of a newly formed Fighting Patrol *“composed of the toughest and most aggressive members of the battalion”*. Aged 30, Richard was regarded as the ideal choice of leader because of *“his fitness and aggressive outdoor nature”*. Later that month he was on leave, returning on 10 May, the day the battalion learned that Germany had invaded Holland and Belgium. By 27 May, it was learnt that the BEF had been surrounded, and the British troops were making their way as best they could to the coast for evacuation. The battalion, which was in Arras, had to withdraw over a canal by stepping stones because all the bridges had been destroyed. The Fighting Patrol was tasked with providing cover for the withdrawal, which they did very effectively, but Richard was killed on the afternoon of 27 May while leading the attack on an enemy machine gun position.

Percy Thomas Robert Evins was only 15 when war broke out. He was the only child of Percy Owen and Annie Mary Evins, who had moved to Ivy Cottage in Dorney village by 1929 and then to Sunnyside on Dorney Common by 1930. In 1939, Percy senior was working as a French polisher and a volunteer ARP warden. In due course, his son joined the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Royal Sussex Regiment, and became a lance corporal. The battalion was in Italy in 1944, and took part in the bloody battle of Monte Cassino in February/March. By July, they were involved in fierce fighting to take the city of Arezzo as part of the efforts to push back the German forces. Percy was killed on 12 July at the age of 22, four days before the city was liberated. Percy's parents were still living at Sunnyside in 1954, when his father became one of the founder members of

the society set up to look after the memorial gardens in the village. Both the parents outlived Percy by more than 30 years, and are buried in Dorney churchyard.