

Vera Holton's diary

(Birchington Tobacconist with brother Victor, hairdresser, 67 Station Road.)

1940

Thursday January 25

Troops are due to arrive tomorrow. What a relief to the few traders left here. We are nearly broke as population is rapidly disappearing, less than 1,000 here now. At Woodford House School the St John's Ambulance men are billeted and they are all heavy smokers. As from January 1st, charges are 8d haircutting and 4d for shaving.

February 2nd

The troops are mostly Northerners and I find it difficult to follow their conversation. Victor has decided to charge them 6d for haircutting and 3d for shaving.

Friday May 10

Germany invaded Holland and Belgium.

May 12th

The Square blocked with five pontoon lorries, sentries stopping all cars, and drivers must produce identity cards. Troops are only allowed out from 2- 6 pm.

Monday May 13th

A few allowed out this evening. Roads no longer blocked, but sentries everywhere, two in bushes opposite Queen Bertha's School, four at Epple corner, nine along cliffs between Epple Bay and West Bay and one in Station Road opposite Lovett's the bakers.¹

Saturday May 25th

Residents are leaving every day. Evacuation of children will take place on June 2nd.

June 22nd

Notices of Evacuation Scheme posted up! We are staying. When old people are evacuated on June 29th, dear Mother has decided to stay, so there will be Victor, and Connie in Westfield Road, and Cousin Archie, Mother and myself here. Poor old Archie's mental condition is deteriorating, but he can still cut hair, so is a help to Victor.

July 23rd

People are still leaving. The chemist next door is so busy. Dogs and cats are taken there to be put down. We can hear the dogs barking and most of them are young and healthy.

Tues. July 23rd 1940.

The population has dropped from 3,600 to 1,400 & there are people still leaving here every day. We are getting used to the siren and A. A. gunfire. There was a night raid recently and bombs were dropped unpleasantly close.

Weds. July 24th

We enjoyed a much better night, although there were several of our planes overhead, and we slept from 11 pm until the Alert at 4 – 7.30 am. Another Alert 11.30 – noon. There was a sale at Bobby's & I accompanied Mum to Margate for necessary shopping and called at the wholesalers for cigs. and chocolates. We were told that two planes were shot

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down this morning on a Margate street & a pilot was killed. The other pilot was taken to hospital.

Thurs. July 25th. Alert noon – 1.20 pm. There were attacks on convoys off Dover. Victor is now a warden, on duty first time to-night.

Sunday July 29th. Alert 2.30 – 3.30 pm. Later, went for a walk with Mrs Chetwynd to Minnis Bay. We had to show our identity cards as we sat on the seat opposite Bay Hotel, and just managed to reach home before Alert 8.10 – 9 pm.

Monday July 29th. A terrific explosion just before midnight. We sat downstairs near the cellar door. There were more distant bangs and then we returned to bed, fully clothed. At 4.30 am heard planes but no Alert until 7.15 – 8 am & another at 9.30 – 11.30 am.

Weds. July 31st. Slept all night until 6.30 am. There were two Alerts later, 3.40 – 6.55 pm & almost immediately another until 7.10 pm. There was the sound of a plane shot down & we saw a parachute in the distance. The siren interferes with trade, as the soldiers are not allowed out during air raids. Yesterday Victor gave Mrs Gambrell² a perm & today Miss Robertson, Upton Lodge Nursing Home Matron. There was an Alert just before the baking process, but she was not nervous, so Victor continued.

Tues. Aug. 6th. Trade is so slack, we had to give 'Player's' a post-dated cheque. 'Rowntrees' order was due to arrive last Weds., but no signs of it yet. My headaches are so frequent and a doctor, a former resident, advised me to take a long walk every evening if possible. I feel depressed and feel so self-conscious and blush when soldiers talk to me in the shop. It is time I outgrew blushing.

Tues. Aug. 8th. Alert 10.15 – 11 am and another 11.45 – noon. Afternoon, I was walking along the cliffs at Beresford Gap when there was an Alert 4 – 5 pm, so had to hurry home.

Friday Aug. 9th. About midnight there was the sound of a plane dive-bombing, so we sat by the cellar door, and later to the shelter. The plane was one of ours and landed in front of St Mildred's Hotel³. The crew (2) fell into the sea & were rescued unhurt. Bombs were dropped in Cecil Square and there were a few casualties caused by broken glass at the Post Office.

Sat. Aug. 10th. 1940 A raid before midnight, we did not hear the siren but went downstairs as usual to sit by the cellar door.

Monday Aug. 12th. Alert 8 am – noon. At 8.30 am there was a high-flying plane leaving a trail of smoke and another one over the sea. Victor thought they were skywriting. After this, the raid began in earnest and 23 Junkers or Dorniers were approaching. We could see the shells bursting around them.

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Some people stood outside watching but we decided it was time to go into the shelter.

Tues. Aug. 13th. Alert 6.50 – 8.30 am. We saw 6 Junkers, one was shot down along Canterbury Road near Miss Palmer's orchard⁴. Victor cycled there and saw the plane broken in two and 4 dead Germans, one looked about 17. Trench diggers at Seasalter are getting nervous as planes swoop down to machine-gun. When a German plane is shot down, the engine is terrifying as it sounds as if it is falling on us!

Weds. Aug. 14th. A quiet night so we enjoyed a good sleep. Alert noon – 1.30 pm, not so bad as Monday's mass raid, but the Germans passed over before the siren this time. Three planes crashed into the sea & there was a lot of machine gunning.

Thurs. Aug. 15th. 4 Alerts, 10 – 11.20 am, noon – 12.45 pm, 2.45 – 5.40 pm, 6.10 – 6.50 pm. During the afternoon, the sky was full of planes flying high. Sitting in the shelter with Mum, I wrote several letters. Victor had to cycle to Margate to fetch stock & he saw a plane swooping over the bathing pool at Cliftonville. A German pilot was rescued from the sea by Lifeboat. Started my walk at 6.50 pm for about 15 minutes and Victor looked after Mum, who is wonderfully brave for her age.

Friday Aug. 16th. Only 2 Alerts noon – 2 pm, 4.30 – 6 pm. Not so much gun fire, the planes were high above the clouds.

Sat. Aug. 17th. Another quiet night, thank God.

Sunday Aug. 18th. Day of mass raids, 11.20 – noon, 12.45 – 4 pm, 5 – 6.30 pm. Large formations of bombers passed over – 80 in one group and more in others. We did not see them but Victor did, he was on duty. We heard 4 planes crash and they were not far away. However, we went indoors and had a hot meal & also managed to go in for tea! Nazi losses are now 669 planes since Aug. 8th & ours 150 (57 airmen saved.)

Sunday Aug. 18th. Londoners can hear their own guns in action now. S.W. areas bombed & buses machine-gunned. Croydon had bombs on Saturday. (Radio news items?)

Sunday August 18th It was a day of raids 11.20 – noon, 12.45 – 4 pm, 5 – 6.50 pm. Large waves of bombers passed over in 50s. We heard four planes crash and loud gun-fire all day. We managed a hot meal at 2 pm and tea at 5 pm in the shelter. Our kitten Sandy came also. Being only six weeks old, he is not upset by gun-fire, being used to it by now. Shrapnel fell in next-door's garden. Archie is not nervous and had just left our shelter ⁵

Tues. Aug. 20th. Alert 2.30 – 4.30 pm. I ventured as far as the Square to buy a loaf & had to take shelter in the baker's, as shrapnel was falling. When Mr Finch from the Powell Arms was crossing the Square, a piece of shrapnel

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just missed him. Mum was upset because I went out, but I really felt unusually hungry. Sandy, our kitten, is growing fast & is now 6 weeks old. The raids do not upset him. If he is playful we shut him in the cellar, but if sleepy, to the shelter. Doris is having a week's holiday from the farm near Sittingbourne. A portion of a crashed plane's door fell as she and her boss were running to the shelter & just missed her, so she said.

August 20th There are now plenty of dive-bombers and "Jerry" machine-guns pedestrians.⁶ Mr Finch from the Powell Arms was crossing the square when a nasty jagged piece of shrapnel just missed him as he ran indoors.⁷

Weds. Aug. 28th. Alert 8.30 am – 12.30 pm, 4 – 6 pm, and the last one, a short one, thank goodness, at 9.30 pm.

Aug. 29th. About 3.40 am, plenty of planes and distant explosions but we stayed in bed, too tired to get up. During the day, incendiaries were dropped near us, but the A.F.S. soon put them out. There were 21 bombers with fighter escorts. Leslie Booth, the window dresser, spent a long time in the shelter with us. Mum and I go to bed dressed now, no sense in undressing. After 6 pm, I enjoyed a walk as far as Spurgeon's Home⁸, now B. H. Q. & full of troops. Several of them know me now, as they are customers. Fortunately, I was home before the 9.30 Alert.

Friday Aug. 30th. More raids, hundreds of planes dodging about like silver flies. Shells bursting, mostly over Ramsgate. My head has been aching again, but I believe the first Alert was 8.15 am & the 6th one 9.30 – 11.15 pm. Very difficult to get a hot meal or make tea and we feel so tired, my bones seem to ache and I bruised my back on the shelter door. Poor Mum's leg is very painful today. As I am losing weight, I have started on a 2nd tin of Sanatogen

Sunday Sept. 8 There was a mass raid in London from 6 pm. 400 killed & 1400 injured. The newspapers did not arrive here until noon. I hope our cousins at Twickenham are safe. They have lock-up garages and in one of them is our tin trunk containing linen & crockery & some of my diaries. We do not go in the shelter now and retire to bed at 10.30 pm & say our prayers.

Tues. Sept. 10 Sat. and Sunday night raids in London must have been terrifying as they lasted ten hours. Massed formations attacked Central and eastern districts. No mail has arrived here yet. A London train had a narrow escape, a bomb fell on the line 2 minutes before the train arrived at the station. Most of the wholesale tobacco warehouses are in the Central districts, so we do not know whether our goods will arrive safely. There was an Alert 8.30 – 11 pm and we slept after this.

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Wed. Sept. 11 As yesterday, newspapers arrived at noon. The barrage has been intensified and there are guns in the streets and the navy is also defending London. Stations are damaged, roads blocked and there must be tons of debris. After these mass raids, Hitler is trying the hit and run method & is still preparing for an invasion.

Sunday Sept. 15 Alert 10 – 11.30 pm and then we had a beautiful sleep until 7 am.

Monday Sept. 16 A short Alert at 1.45 am and another at 4.45 – 5.10 am. Bombs in the distance. A letter from Dolly at Twickenham, written last Thursday. Bombs were dropped on Marble Hill⁹ & St Margaret's¹⁰. She took Richard under the stairs – safer than running to the shelter.

Wed. Sept. 18 Alert 9.10 – 10.47 am, 12.30 – 2.35 pm, 4.- 4.35 pm, 4.50 – 6 pm. A formation of bombers travelling in the direction of St Nicholas, but mostly the raids consisted of planes in twos and threes. After the 6 pm All Clear, I walked to the cliffs, never met anyone and the trenches now stretch from Grenham Bay to Beresford Gap. Victor had to deal with a rush of customers after the 6 pm All Clear and he finished the last one. Then a sergeant had a shampoo as well at 7.45 pm. We do not open the shop so early now, he gets very tired, so much standing. Several shops will be closing and already 28 are closed – Barclay's Bank¹¹, MacFisheries fishmongers¹², Hoskins Ladies' Hairdresser, Mrs Moss¹³, draper, Mr Slade the dental surgeon¹⁴, D. Foreman the fishmonger¹⁵, A. Raman the Turf Accountant¹⁶, Sawney & Lewin Ladies' hairdressers¹⁷, Wilson & Toyne Solicitors¹⁸, R. Thomas Architect and Surveyor, and S. Ingram Dental surgeon¹⁹.

So now we have no solicitors, dentists or ladies' hairdressers and only one doctor, Dr A. Bowie²⁰, & two Chemists Courts²¹ and Evans²². The Wayside Tea Gardens²³ are not closing & are quite busy, mostly with officers and members of the Red Cross & A. F. S. stationed at Woodford House School. Went to Westgate to have an aching tooth extracted and arrived home just before an Alert, thank God. Fortunately we are all in good health at present, but Mother had to call in Dr Bowie to treat two boils in her armpit – very painful.

Saturday Sept. 21 Newspapers arrive a little earlier now. Walked to Beresford Gap and saw the boom some distance out beyond low tide.

Monday Sept. 23 Alert 8 – 9 pm only, so a peaceful day.

Tues. Sept. 24 Alert 1.15 – 5.30 am, another 8.30 – 10 pm. Large numbers of planes. Victor saw an extra large bomber with an escort of fighters. Quiet late afternoon, so walked as far as Minnis Bay. Barbed wire and trenches everywhere now.

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Weds. Sept. 25 Alert 2 – 6 am & 8.30 – 10 am. No sound of bombs. London is getting them every night, churches bombed & East End residential districts. About 12.30 am bombs were dropped on Cliftonville, Astoria Cinema got a direct hit (it was closed a few months ago), near Munro Cobb's and some on Broadstairs. Our shop is half empty as stock is a long time coming now.

Monday Nov. 4th At 1.45 am there was a terrific explosion & we heard several low flying planes & explosions, awake again at 6.20 am.

Tues Nov. 5th My cold not so bad today, it was draughty so did not serve in the shop. Another Alert this morning, fifteen planes, another explosion shook the place, even louder than the one at 1.45 am. Connie came in for a chat and after the All Clear at 3.50 pm there was another Alert at 4 pm. When Mum was filling the kettle, she cried out, "Come quickly". The sound of low flying planes became louder & and we all rushed outside the back door as a Messerschmitt flew past, just missing next door's roof, followed by two Spitfires circling and doing a Victory Roll.

There was smoke pouring from the German plane as it disappeared behind a house at the top of Crescent Road. It flew over all the gardens so no damage was done. We saw the pilot bale out and ran indoors in case of an explosion. Later we hear that the plane crashed on a small allotment at the top of Crescent Road, next to the empty house called "The Moorings". The pilot and parachute landed in a tree in Spencer Road and was soon surrounded by soldiers. Luckily, there were no bombs on the plane. The pilot was slightly cut on his lip and wrist and asked for some Whisky!

1941

November 2nd Compulsory closing of Hairdressing Salons, 6 pm and 7.30 pm on Saturdays until Feb. 28 1942. Tobacconists 8 pm and 9 pm on Saturdays.

1942

Thursday August 13th Troops left and the advance guard arrived, so things are a bit quieter on the roads. Gertie and I walked to Minster. It was a nice change from local walks undertaken for a long time, especially when there was a curfew and the beach closed to civilians. There are trenches and dug-outs along the cliffs, also gun sites, several on cliffs at Beresford Gap. Troops billeted at Beresford Hotel & Grenham House School. They allow us to walk a short distance but we have to shew our identity cards. On our return journey from Minster, there was an Alert at 8.45 pm and a kind lady invited us indoors for shelter until the All Clear at 9 pm and we arrived home safe and sound at 9.55 pm. The gunfire was terrific. I think they were after Ramsgate this time, so we were not far away from the bombing and so thankful to reach home.

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It was moonlight and very warm. Before we arrived at the square two lorries full of troops passed us and they all waved and whistled, we waved back. I recognised some of them as they buy my "Woods" and "Weights" on pay days. The N.C.O.s smoke "Players", "Gold Flake" or "Senior Service", all dearer than Woods and Weights. The Officers buy their Pipe Tobacco from us, as we stock the expensive brands, such as Balkan Sobanie.

Vera Holton was 36 at the outbreak of World War 2 and had lived in the village all, or almost all her life. The above extracts are what she chose to write out from her War Diaries and then pass over to the Margate Local History Library. We have tried to trace the rest of her jottings through the war, but have not been successful so far. She also mentions other diaries stored up at Twickenham in the 'tin trunk' (September 8th 1940). Again, these have not so far been traced.

Brief though these extracts are, they certainly give an excellent 'flavour' of the mood and the tensions during those momentous times.

Jennie Burgess : July 2004

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- ¹ Became Frederick's Bakery, was demolished in the mid 1960s and then had Halifax.
 - ² Lived at 82 Station Road
 - ³ Now Grenham Bay Court Residential Home
 - ⁴ Miss Palmer lived at 76 Park Avenue.
 - ⁵ This note was an additional set of comments in some related material.
 - ⁶ This note is not entirely clear what Vera meant, but it would appear the Germans were machine gunning pedestrians
 - ⁷ Another of Vera's additional notes
 - ⁸ Now the site of Birch Hill Park
 - ⁹ Marble Hill – just west of Twickenham railway station
 - ¹⁰ St Margaret's Church – see note 7.
 - ¹¹ 107 Station Rd
 - ¹² 4 Station Rd
 - ¹³ 18 Station Rd
 - ¹⁴ 99 Station Rd
 - ¹⁵ 95 Station Rd
 - ¹⁶ 59 Station Rd
 - ¹⁷ 101 Station Rd
 - ¹⁸ 105 Station Rd
 - ¹⁹ 105 Station Rd
 - ²⁰ 12 Alpha Road
 - ²¹ 69 Station Rd
 - ²² 33 Station Rd
 - ²³ On the corner of Station Rd and Eastfield Road