

MINUTES OF THE 86th MEETING OF AYNHO HISTORY SOCIETY HELD AT THE VILLAGE HALL, AYNHO ON WEDNESDAY 30th MARCH 2016

Present: - Rupert Clark – Chairman & Treasurer
Peter Cole - Secretary.

1. Chairman's Report

Elizabeth Cartwright-Hignett has announced that her son William is getting married soon. Members of the Italian Chigi-Zondadari and German von Sandizell families will be present.

2. Secretary's Report

He has been sent a package of 49 old postcards and photos of Aynho. There were mostly purchased or taken by the daughter of a woman, Fanny Watts, who was born in Aynho in 1870. She left here and married a John Irons, and they had a daughter Constance Mary Irons. Some of these pictures we already have, but as Constance kept them in a folder, they are in pristine condition, and are better detailed than ours. More importantly, she has identified some of the people in the cards or photos. Peter has traced them in our censuses, more anon.

3. "Out of Tragedy came forth liberation" – civilian and military evacuation in World War 2 by Bob Hunter

This talk is about information most of which has been kept secret for more than 50 years. We all know about Dunkirk, but there were 12 other evacuations, which took place immediately afterwards in 1940.

The talk deals with everything chronologically, but is combined with Bob's own story of his family's move from Singapore, which took place over the same two months. He had been born there, and his father was recalled to England as he was a civil engineer in the Admiralty, and was needed at home. *The ship they travelled on was the Viceroy of India, flagship of the P & O line, and the first ship that didn't have propeller shafts, but had direct electric motors, so was very quiet. It was a luxury boat, but only half full. The most prominent passenger was John Northcliffe, a previous governor of Hong Kong. The ship left Singapore on 24th May 1940.*

It was thought that London would be bombed, so the Government decided on a mass evacuation of children from the capital. 120,000 were sent to rural areas. Locally about 3,000 came to South Northants, including 68 to Middleton Cheney and 8 to Aynho. Many in Middleton had chicken pox and/or measles, and locals described some of them as being filthy, undernourished and suffering from rickets and impetigo. They didn't like the local food, and wanted beer and chips. Many were quite unhappy and wanted to go home. The children's language was obscene and limited. Many had never seen any wild animals, and had no idea what vegetables were. There had been significant child evacuations in 1939 such was the concern of the impact of the Luftwaffe bombing threat; particularly after Guernica in 1937. Arnold (Bill) Pyatt wrote to tell of this evacuation to Aynho, copy in full below. Leaflets were certainly distributed around the village calling for folk to take in similar evacuees.

By this time the Viceroy of India had reached Bombay, where they learned that the Suez Canal had been closed, so they would have to travel all round the Cape of Good Hope, adding more than three weeks to the journey. Still no one realised how serious matters were becoming.

The Germans had entered Norway, and found that the Allies had already been secretly evacuated. However the battleships Scharnhorst and Gneisenau sank a British tanker and trawler. The aircraft carrier HMS Glorious was spotted by a plane from the Scharnhorst, but the English captain didn't put

up a surveillance plane, as he was formerly a gunner, and didn't know anything about aircraft war. So the *Glorious* was sunk with massive loss of life. Two British destroyers attacked the *Scharnhorst* with torpedoes, and severely damaged her, but did not destroy her, and she sank both of them. We lost a lot of ships and aircraft, but the Norwegians lost everything.

The Germans bypassed the Maginot Line, and quickly swept down the French coast. Britain realised that they would not be able to defend the Channel Islands, as they were so close to the French coast, so in June 1940 5,000 schoolchildren, 500 teachers and 15,000 men and women were evacuated to England. This was such a hurried operation that they were all told to just pack one small suitcase and something to eat, and that is what happened. It was hoped that one more ship could bring many more out, but the Germans bombed Guernsey harbour and invaded the islands, preventing any further evacuation. A photograph showed that the women of Cheadle Hulme set up a welcome party for many of them, with food, flags and bunting within a couple of days of their arrival, demonstrating how flexible the British people were to all these evacuations.

The ship meanwhile was progressing down the east side of Africa, and pulled in at Durban. Bob's father went to find a sailmaker, because he knew how the wind could blow around the Cape of Good Hope, and the ship had no lifejackets. He purchased sufficient, and Bob produced his own, although as a young boy then, it wouldn't be much use now. There was a terrible storm on the 14th June, with ferocious winds and 60 feet high waves. This did some damage, but the life jackets weren't needed.

Whereas a large part of the British Army (nearly 340,000 troops) had survived being beaten back to Dunkirk and had been bombed and shot at while waiting for the Little Ships to repatriate them to England on 4th June, another large part of the British Expeditionary Force had remained closer to the Maginot Line. Peter Cullen of Aynhoe Lodge was one of the lucky members of the Ox and Bucks to be rescued from Dunkirk. The Germans were now pressing westwards, forcing all these right to the extreme western shores of France, from Cherbourg in the north, to Saint-Nazaire much further south.

Churchill had only been P.M. for a few days. On the night of 14th June after he had gone to bed he received an urgent telephone call on a secure line from General Alan Brooke, Force Commander, who managed to convince him that that his positions were untenable, and that evacuation of his forces of 150,000 was vital to maintain the war effort. Churchill realised that the Small Ships used at Dunkirk would not be suitable this time. He set up Operation Aerial to rescue as many troops as possible with immediate effect. That same night he appointed and contacted two Commanders in Chief, one functioning from Portsmouth, and the other from the Western Approaches in Plymouth. The Portsmouth one was Admiral Sir William James GCB, who as a young lad had been painted by his grandfather Millais in his famous "Bubbles" picture, which was used for years in the Pears soap adverts. They in turn worked through the night to ensure that suitable ships were identified, refuelled and made ready for action as quickly as possible. Hitler had decreed that German forces were authorised to attack any merchant shipping of any nationality in waters around Britain, and that survivors in the sea were not to be rescued. This of course was completely against all meanings of seamanship. Luckily they were so involved with their pursuit of the British Army that they didn't notice what was going on over the Channel, at least so far as Cherbourg was concerned.

The Royal Mail Ship *Straithaird*, which could accommodate 1,200 passengers, was situated at Southampton. On three consecutive nights starting on June 16th she made trips to Cherbourg and brought back 5,000 RAF and Army personnel on each one safely to England by daybreak.

Smaller ports such as Brest couldn't take large ships, so a fishing boat was used to rescue troops from these places. The fish holds were low down, so you could cram a lot of people into them.

HMS *Wolverine* was a Royal Navy destroyer which acted as an escort for ships going to the western French ports. He was told that there would be 19 ships to escort, but by the time they set sail there

were 26, including two trawlers and an oiler, and lots of small ships which could only do 4 knots. So the whole convoy had to proceed at just 4 knots, with the Wolverine racing up and down on each side to make sure that there were no German submarines around. The Wolverine had been involved in the Norway evacuations, and after the Brest & Saint-Nazaire one she continued to take part in no fewer than 27 North Atlantic convoys. Her skipper, Lieutenant-Commander Rowland, must have been a very skilful man. The trawlers had been converted into anti-submarine ships.

On the 17th June RMS Lancastria was anchored in the Loire Estuary at Saint-Nazaire, having taken on at least 7,000 troops. She was suddenly bombed by German planes, and sank within a few minutes with the loss of some 5,000 men. This was the worst disaster in maritime history.

One man living in Middleton Cheney until recently had been on the Lancastria when it had been hit. He said that he had jumped into the water and made his way over to the SS Oronsay, another liner nearby. This had already been hit and damaged, but it did not sink, and eventually reached Falmouth. He said it was a miracle that he had survived.

The RMS Strathaird also evacuated 6,000 Belgian and Dutch troops from Brest just two days after her last Cherbourg trip.

The MV Guinean, a cargo ship actually made in Germany, saved 3,600 troops from St. Nazaire. At this point the Western Approaches Command takes over and deals with the ports to the south of St. Nazaire and even further away as far as Gibraltar, North Africa and Casablanca. In all 249,000 Army & Air-force personnel, not only British, but French, Polish, Dutch, Belgian and Czech and in addition 20,000 Heads of State, Consular staff, Government Ministers and professional civilians were rescued under Operation Aerial.

While this was going on the French were doing their own evacuation, and a French liner SS Champlain called at La Pallice twice transporting refugees to North America. On the second trip she was sunk by a German mine, but all but 11 of her passengers were saved. *The Viceroy of India had come up from Cape Town to Free Town, and refuelled. Here the captain received a message from Churchill asking the ship to call in at Gibraltar to pick up some Polish and Czech special experienced airmen and troops from there and bring them to England. A photo was shown of the ship arriving at Gibraltar on 2nd July.*

Also on the 2nd July Operation Catapult was launched to persuade the French Navy to ensure that the Germans didn't get their hands on six battleships and two battlecruisers of the French fleet in an Algerian port. A powerful fleet of 17 ships led by battlecruiser HMS Hood was dispatched to Mers el Kébir (Oran today). Admiral Somerville gave the French four options: to join the British fleet, be escorted to a British port or the West Indies, have the ships disarmed under British supervision, or to scuttle the ships. They were told that if Admiral Gensoul refused to accept any of these, force would be used to destroy the ships.

The French refused all these choices, and after conferring with the Admiralty Somerville was ordered to open fire on the French ships. 1,300 French sailors were killed. The French never forgave us for this, but it had the effect in America that if the British could do this to their closest ally Britain was not yet lost, so that although The USA did not join the war until Pearl Harbour, they quite soon assisted Britain with armaments.

The Viceroy of India made a roundabout route to avoid most of the Bay of Biscay, for some of the time escorted by a destroyer, and finally arrived safely in Plymouth on 7th July 1940.

One man who recently died in Middleton Cheney was Polish, and at his funeral relatives told Bob that he had been rescued by boat from Gibraltar in July 1940, so he must have been on that ship. It is not certain, but very likely, that one of the Polish airmen brought back by the RMS Viceroy of India was Stanislaw Czeppe, who subsequently married the Aynho school mistress Charlotte Govier. Charlotte had left New Zealand to come to Britain, we don't know how she ended up in Aynho but we are grateful that she did.

There were a couple of other later evacuations. Three weeks later the SS Anselm left Liverpool for Halifax, Canada with 82 Children's Overseas Reception Board children, and 2,600 followed later. The second in mid-September was less successful. The SS City of Benares sank, but of the 90 children on board 83 died of exposure, and only six survived on a raft after 8 days adrift.

In Aynho, Elizabeth and Brother Edward Cartwright as very young children were evacuated to the USA for the duration of the war. They lived in New Jersey with the Moseley family. The two returned in 1945. Their parents stayed in England which must have been a considerable wrench but duty called. Richard, their Father, aged 11, had undertaken an extraordinary solo journey back across Europe 1914. He had become separated from his tutor as they tried to leave Germany at the start of WW 1. He was eventually rescued by the Red Cross and trained back, presumably via Switzerland (to cross the trenches) to Britain either late 1914 or early 1915.

Following the talk, 8 members of the village recounted their evacuation experiences.

4. Forthcoming Meetings

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| April 27 th | "The Mary Rose, a window into Tudor life at sea" |
| May 25 th | Recusant Papists of the Aynho District: The secret survival of clandestine Catholics in the C16 th – C18 th |