

GLHS guided walk: Wooler in World War II, November 24, 2021

On 24th November, Alan Sture led 15 members on a guided walk around central Wooler, bringing to life the talk he'd given to the Society entitled Wooler in WWII (available to view on the GLHS website).

Far from a quiet backwater, Wooler was a key defensive point in North Northumberland, and the administrative, supply & social centre for army personnel, Milfield RAF training camp, & a POW camp. During the war the town was 'full', the 'resident' population of just under 2,000 swollen by military personnel, evacuees, the Women's Land Army, civil administration personnel & POWs.

Alan explained that, with the threat of war, training started for first aid and Air Raid precautions in 1938. In 1939/1940 frantic preparations began to repulse any invasion by sea or air. The east coast was considered particularly vulnerable so, as backup for the defences at the coast, inland 'stop lines' were planned to prevent the enemy reaching the industrial areas.

The Essex Regiment was based in Wooler for 6 months 1940–41, billeted in Loretto House (Fairfield Hall), the Temperance Hall (Hope House, Church Street), and private houses. Military vehicles were parked around Burnhouse Road and a fleet of buses was stationed in Ewart Park ready take the troops to the defensive positions at the coast.

Wooler was strategically important because of its position at the intersection of two stop lines: it became a 'defended village', ringed by 13 pillboxes. Ten roadblocks monitored traffic – fifth columnist Nazi sympathisers were feared even in Wooler (in spring 1939 Oswald Mosely held a rally in the Archbold Hall).

Nationally, approximately 18,000 pill boxes were built between 1940 and 1942 each according to one of eight basic designs but there were regional variations. Their construction was often sub-contracted to local building firms, one company in the South East completing 200 in three weeks! A local builder, George Elliot, built the form work for the Wooler pillboxes. Anti- invasion planning continued until the latter part of 1942, as the British Commando raid on the Bruneval radar site showed that medium to large-scale raids by special forces were still possible.

Our walk began near the Cheviot Centre, then the offices of Glendale Rural District Council & in 1939 the temporary HQ of 162nd Defence Brigade of the East Anglian regiment. GRDC was charged with coordinating the wartime agricultural committees.

At the bottom of Ryecroft Road, the newly-built Ryecroft Hotel (refurbished as flats in 2020) was requisitioned by the army as an Officers' Mess before it had even opened as a hotel and, between February and December 1941, it also served as the HQ for the 225th brigade of the Northumberland (County) Division.

Alan led us through Fenton Grange to an easily accessible pill box overlooking the (now disused) railway line and the roads across the Millfield Plain. As a last line of defence, the

Home Guard would man the pillboxes, this one with a light machine gun, but as fear of invasion faded local children enjoyed playing in them.

Returning to the A697 and the Berwick Road junction, site of a wartime roadblock, Alan showed us photographs of different types of roadblocks: 'hairpin' and 'hedgehog' layouts, and obstructions including moveable concrete blocks and broken-down vehicles.

The railway line with its four sidings at Wooler was kept very busy: troop movements; tanks from the local munitions factory at Melrose; evacuees and later POWs. The station waiting rooms provided accommodation for the Women's Land Army until their hostel was built in 1942. From 1942 Akeld station became the railhead for building & supply of RAF Milfield;

Walker's Garage, the house immediately north of what is now Hope's Garage, became the NAAFI's supply depot for all North Northumberland.

We crossed Wooler Water on the Chatton Road bridge. Alan explained that here the roadblock consisted of gunners in a shoulder-height trench along the road and two upstairs in the first house in Weetwood Road. All the bridges were mined with explosives, as a last resort to hamper any invasion.

We continued through Scott's Park, which had been an extensive, fortified railway loading dock. We looked across South Road to what was the Drill Hall Cinema where, throughout the war, there were four programmes a week, and two showings held daily Monday to Saturday, including Christmas Day.

Along Brewery Road, on the site of what is now the middle school, was Prisoner of War (POW) Camp 105. From 1942 it housed 600 Italians, who were moved out to Chatton, Hagerston & other satellite camps in 1944 so that 'white' German POWs (those considered to have little or no Nazi sympathies) could be held there, and then from 1945-8 it held displaced persons, mainly from Eastern Europe.

At Wooler Bridge, Alan described how it was made a single lane, controlled by three roadblocks on the access roads to the north, south and east, with firing points in what is now the Riverside Bar. Pillboxes were placed to prevent tanks using any alternative routes and so maintain control of the Milfield Plain.

In the Market Place, Alan explained that Wooler was the commercial & social hub for a wide area: the shops and the popular Saturday night dances at the Archbold Hall in Church Street served both the town's resident population of just under 2,000 along with the 2000 servicemen and women at Milfield, and those staffing the POW Camp. (Servicemen based near Wooler included at one time Intelligence officers Dirk Bogarde and Anthony Quayle.)

Wooler was on the flight path to the vital munitions factories around Glasgow, so searchlights were positioned in Cheviot Street. Fortunately the town escaped bombing raids apart from on 7th April 1941, when 30 bombs & incendiary devices were dropped, damaging two properties.

Alan gave us a most informative and entertaining walk, enabling us to appreciate Wooler's role in both in defence and in preparation for D-Day and victory.