

The Postmaster's Daughter

Jean Peter tells her story in 2021

recorded by
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Jean Peter was nine years old in 1939. Her father John Hughes was well known in Lenham. He was the postmaster and amongst other responsibilities ran a farm bordering Faversham Road, where houses now stand. He both reared animals and grew vegetables and fruit, including strawberries, which he took to the railway station by horse and carriage.



Jean Peter with her sisters and brother

Jean was then at primary school, the old Lenham School, situated in the Headcorn Road, but now demolished. The Hughes family was a busy one. She had two sisters and two brothers, and remembers her father telling Valentine, her eldest sister, 'You're working in the shop!' No choice of careers for women then. Esme, her other sister, worked in the telephone exchange, which was at the Lenham Post Office but later moved to Maidstone.

And then on 3rd September war broke out with Germany, and life in Lenham changed. One of her brothers had died young, but the other joined the Royal Navy. 'He spent his 21st on the

high seas,' Jean recalls. Her brother-in-law, Esme's husband, enlisted in the army. And her father – already busy enough with the extra post-office work that war brought – joined the Observer Corps. With three other Lenham residents, he kept a watch near the railway station for enemy action.



John Hughes in the Observer Corps

At Lenham School, they were working half days only, Jean remembers. They attended in the mornings only for one week, and then the next week spent the afternoons there. An air-raid shelter was quickly in place, in this case unusually as it was at ground level, not dug beneath the playground. Later in the war when Jean was at Ashford Grammar School, a bomb fell in the middle of exams, and on another occasion she saw a doodlebug (the V1 flying 'buzz'-bombs dropped from 1944) coming down at what was then called High Trees, on the far side of the A20 near the entrance to Ham Lane. Earlier in the war a bomb had hit the hall of what later became the United Reform Church (now demolished) in Maidstone Road just after schoolchildren had left for the day.

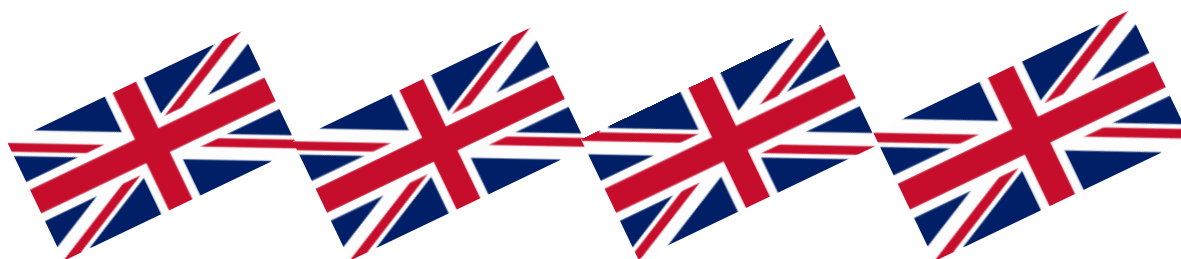
Daily life in Lenham adjusted to a world where, Jean says, 'Soldiers were everywhere.' Billeted all around the village, in areas such as Chilston Park and Hothfield, they were regular visitors to the Square. An outbuilding at Grove House, just off the Square, acted as a NAAFI (Navy, Army and Air Force Institute) for the troops, selling food, drinks to the forces and acting as a make-do entertainment centre. The village hall, then situated in the Limes on

one side of the Square, hosted Saturday evening dances to the music of the Tom Matthews Band – ‘only three or four of them’, Jean says, but it was enough for dancers intent on enjoying themselves to the full. There were also cinema shows in the hall.

And then there was food rationing to reckon with. Like so many other communities, Lenham had its own arrangements for coping with it. One of them, Jean remembers, was a group of villagers clubbing together to rear a pig between them – to be shared when ‘ready’ for distribution.

Jean’s mother had a stroke in 1940, leaving her paralysed on one side. Her husband was busier than ever, especially after the so-called Phoney War ended in the spring of 1940. The post and telegraph office were in charge of the siren that gave the eerie warning of imminent bombing and later the clearance for which everyone would be waiting. The messages were sent from Maidstone: ‘red for the warning, and green for the clearance,’ Jean said, adding, ‘Up and down eight times for the warning, and the all clear had to run for a minute.’

A fire-watching team, which included schoolboys, was established to give warning of fires breaking out in the village either through bombs or the frequent incendiaries.



The coming of VE Day in 1945 was marked in Lenham just as in all the other towns and villages of Britain with general celebrations – parties for the children, but for the adults? A dance in the village hall of course – with the village band playing flat out.