

Halling View VE Day 2020 - Remembering VE Day

Do you remember VE Day? If you do, you were probably a child at the time. Your memories of the war will be different from those of adults. Perhaps you were evacuated to somewhere supposedly safer and had to live with people you didn't know, far from home. Some evacuees (like my mother and uncle) were billeted with good people who remained friends long after the war, but some such children were very badly treated. You probably remember taking refuge from air raids in shelters or, in an emergency, anywhere you could get. There were public shelters (often very crowded) and shelters in people's own homes. Some children were more frightened of the spiders than the bombs in Anderson Shelters which people dug out in their gardens, mostly underground but with a topping of corrugated iron and the soil dug out in the process of construction. The sound of the air raid warning siren (Moaning Minnie or Wailing Winnie) still sends a shiver down the spines of those who remember the Blitz. There was rationing - very few sweets, a limited range of fruit, not much dairy or meat. They say that people ate healthier then than we do now and they got more exercise. Even the few who had cars had to put up with petrol rationing. Public transport was overcrowded and unreliable. "Is your journey really necessary?" civilians were asked. Talk about recycling. It was make do and mend. Nothing could be thrown away if it was repairable. Wasting food was a criminal offence. The men of the Merchant Navy risked their lives to keep us fed and thousands died in the effort. There was even a limit on how much bath water you could use - I think because of the amount of fuel required to heat it. You couldn't expect a lot of toys even at Christmas. New clothes were a rare treat. You dad might be away from home - perhaps for years - in the forces. Younger children might not even remember their fathers. And, of course, many dads never did come home or, when they did, were physically and mentally no longer the men they had been. Mum might be doing war work. Other adults you knew might be in the Home Guard or fire watching or in the ARP (Air Raid Precautions). Children generally used to have much more freedom than they do now and perhaps more so during the war when adults had less time to supervise them. Games included playing in bomb sites and picking up shrapnel and unexploded ammunition - sometimes with tragic results. Schools might be bombed, schoolmates casualties of war. Children became experts in aircraft recognition. Is it one of ours or one of theirs? It was very exciting to observe troop movements, construction of defensive structures and (eventually) preparations for D Day, but it was all top secret and if you did find out or guess what was going on, you absolutely mustn't say anything. Careless talk costs lives. Walls have ears.

A diminishing number remember. Those of us born in the fifties and sixties had parents who well remembered the war and grandparents who remembered two world wars, but, in my experience, they never spoke much of the real horrors. So even we don't really know, although the world we grew up in was unchanged in lots of ways since the war. There were still plenty of bomb sites and other evidences of conflict such as pill boxes (little brick buildings from which small guns could be fired) around the coast. School photographs from the fifties don't look so different from school photographs from the forties. Following the shared experience of the world war, there was a very strong determination to make the future better with a new Education Act in 1944, the establishment of the NHS in 1948, a comprehensive welfare state, and a programme of house building not only to replace what had been destroyed by the bombs but also to get rid of the slums which disfigured so many of our cities. There was still the Cold War. People worried about a third world war with Russia in which nuclear weapons would be used, perhaps annihilating humanity once and for all. They said that only rats and cockroaches would survive.

Memories fade. The sixties saw the beginning of the huge expansion of the motorway network. Personal computers arrived for ordinary people in the eighties. Then the mobile 'phone and the internet. We no longer fear war as something which could threaten our way of life. Instead, we worry about global warming - which, paradoxically, has been a result of our increasing prosperity over the last couple of hundred years.

So what can VE Day mean to the different generations born since the war - my generation, my niece's generation, their children's generation? So much has changed.

These are the things I feel strongly about. We should never fail to honour the sacrifices made by the wartime generation. We should always be grateful for the defeat of Nazism and Fascism and work and pray for the elimination of belligerent, oppressive and cruel political systems throughout the world and in every generation. We should be absolutely committed to peace at home and abroad. We should look after our

veterans and the families of military personnel properly – something we still haven't got right. We should not lose sight of the vision the wartime generation had that it is not only a matter of defeating the evils which threaten our safety and security but also of building a better world in which all human beings can flourish in peace and prosperity with freedom and ample access to education, health care and decent housing. Finally, as a Christian I must point this out, that the sure and certain hope is that the kingdoms of this world become the Kingdom of our God and of His Christ.

The anniversary will be marked in various ways in the village. We shall hold special services in St John's Church Halling at 11.00 am and St Michael's Church Cuxton at 9.30 am on Sunday 10th May.

Roger Knight,
Rector of Cuxton & Halling.