

REMEMBERING THE TIME WHEN THE WAR CAME TO LLANDOW..

by DOUG MORTON

LLANMIHANGEL farmer Bill Elward would never have guessed anything was amiss if his horses had not bolted that fine spring morning in 1939.

Tracking their escape through the fields to Sigingstone, 19-year-old Bill cursed the inconvenient start made to his day by the fleeing animals.

Nearing the field where they were grazing, though, Bill came across a very strange discovery - men in vehicles were ripping down trees and clearing a space on Mr Carne's land.

"I had the shock of my life when I saw them taking down rows of trees," says Bill, now a retired man aged 81.

"We had never been told what was going on there - we did not have anything like The GEM in those days - but that was the first time I knew something was happening."

Far from being a small tree removal operation, however, what was starting was clearance for the construction of Llandow airfield - a site that would provide RAF training and employment for hundreds of people throughout World War Two.

Within months of Bill Elward's discovery, the shells of hangars were starting to appear on the rural Vale landscape, and this peaceful area of farms and fields would give way to one of south Glamorgan's most strategic air bases during the war.

The construction of the airfield (overlooked by a London firm that had started constructing St Athan in 1936) required huge manpower - nine hangars were to be built on four separate sites around the Llandow area, in addition to the main airfield site itself.

Scores of workers came from the surrounding areas - it was not uncommon to see as many as 14 or 15 Henderson bus loads of Rhondda men making their way to the site every morning - and local employment was given a huge boost.

Builders, engineers and electricians worked together during the early construction at the Nash Manor Estate site, and once some buildings had gone up, staff were required to fill the canteens, to carry out repairs and to fill security posts.

Canteen worker Bill Hancock, who was 14 when the war broke out, remembers the time well.

"We would be sent to collect 15lb of sausages from the Thomas brothers of Llantwit Major every morning, and if you wanted anything, you had to order it."

"A cooked meal in those days would cost you four pence, a cup of tea would cost you a penny, and it really was a busy place to work."

"I think the women were probably the most concerned about the food, especially after rationing came in, but everybody was fed and thrived."

Construction of the hangars did not really finish until around 1942 (and even after that construction at the site continued well after the war), but one little known fact was that they were camouflaged completely in turf to hide them from the enemy.

Bill Hancock continues: "The hangars were covered front and back in this wonderful turf, which always stayed green, even in the summer."

"It was so effective that when they came to sell the buildings after the war, it was difficult to get the turf off!"

In addition to the hangars, huts and brick buildings, three runways were constructed around the site, and men from as far away as Darlington and Doncaster came to build the strips.

"The most impressive aspect is that the runways were all stone-pitched by hand," Bill Hancock recalls.

"After that, ash from Aberthaw Power Station was put down, then quarry waste and chippings were placed on top."

"The job was completed by driving huge 10-tonne rolling lorries, owned by Richards of Newport, across the surface."

"In those days, they always built three runways - they later extended the one running from south west of Sigingstone - but now it seems that only one is needed."

The effect of the traffic on the roads should not be underestimated during the war.

Workers' coaches, service vans and lorries all needed to negotiate the winding rural roads around Llandow, and it is a blessing that there were never any serious accidents in the area.

"There were not many cars in those days," Bill Elward recalls, "but in addition to all the service vehicles, the RAF also has a driving school in the area."

"Every day there would be between 30-40 vehicles coming through Llanmihangel, and occasionally they

would get stuck.

"They also had the 60ft Queen Marys - attic lorries used for carrying whole Spitfires - going from Cowbridge to Llantrisant so it was a lot to contend with."

"We saw it as a bit of a nuisance, but we always managed to get the children to school."

Civilian and agricultural traffic also had to use the roads around Llandow, of course, and certainly some of the busiest times happened when employees set off to work at Bridgend's munitions factory.

Adults ranging in age from young adults to spinsters worked here, some losing fingers in the process.

Bill Elward recalls how his sister "like many workers used to return home from the factory with her face yellow from the powder."

"Even women in their 40s and 50s were called up to work at the munitions factory and everyone was keen to do their part."

Bill Elward, like many Vale boys older enough, wanted to see front-line action and volunteered to fight.

However, his application was turned down in 1940, as being a farmer for the Welsh Agricultural War Committee, the Government deemed his agricultural efforts more valuable to the war effort.

Because of this, like many agricultural workers, he decided to join the local Home Guard.

Many young boys from the Vale did see action, however, and Llandow airfield once built was used as a training ground for a large proportion of them.

● To find out more about Llandow airfield's role in the war, the Home Guard and enemy conflict, read next week's GEM.



LEFT TO RIGHT: Mr Bill Hancock and Mr Bill Elward. Mr Elward is holding his certificate of service in the Home Guard.

BARRIE & FOY INTERIORS

RE-UPHOLSTERY & CURTAIN MAKING SERVICE

We are confident that our prices are unbeatable!
Your 3-piece suite re-upholstered in leather/fabric or loose covers made

- * Large selection of Fabrics
- * 7 day turnaround
- includes many leading brands
- * Furniture restoration service
- * A very competitive upholstery service
- * Quality workmanship guaranteed

PLUS - Extensive range of upholstered furniture for sale Modern, Antique, Private and Commercial Work

At Barrie & Foy Interiors Limited,

42 EASTGATE, COWBRIDGE

5 Days a Week Tuesday-Saturday 10am-5pm

01446 771210

