

FRIENDS OF GOSPORT MUSEUM

NEWSLETTER

June 2004

Summer Social

Sunday 4th July 12 - 4 p.m.

to be held at

5 Grange Farm, Little Woodham
Lane, off Howe Road, Gosport

Tickets £7-50 each are available from
the Reception Desk at the Museum in
Walpole Road (Tel:02392 588035)
until Saturday 26th June

*If you have not yet bought your ticket,
please buy it now so that we can know
how many to cater for.*

September Coach Trip

Saturday 11th September

to

Kingston Lacy, Dorset

Visit a superb house containing an
outstanding collection of paintings
and set in a lovely park

*Please book now if you haven't done
so yet. Contact Mary Duly (Tel: 02392
359804) or the Museum Reception
Desk (Tel:02392 588035)*

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 18TH MAY 2004

The move to Thorngate Halls due to the closure of the Museum's meeting room proved highly successful. Easy parking, bus stops outside the door, a pleasant room and no stairs to climb and an excellent Lounge where a variety of refreshments were available helped make this a most enjoyable evening.

Mike Geddes, our president, chaired the meeting until after the election of the Committee Members who remain unchanged for this next year. It was unanimously agreed that from April 2005 membership fees should be increased to £5 for single members and £7-50 for couples. Reports were received from the Committee's officers and, in her absence, from the Curator. Mike Geddes is also the Chairman of the Hampshire Recreation and Heritage Policy Review Committee and of the Gosport Museum Joint Management Committee and so is uniquely qualified to answer questions about the new Discovery Centre and the future of Gosport Museum which he readily did at the end of the formal part of the meeting.

Following a break for refreshments members enjoyed a memorable talk by Mary Tillman about the shop run by her family for very many years and showed us numerous pictures and artifacts to illustrate her talk.

Visit to HMS Sultan and Grange Airfield Museum on 6th October

Numbers will be limited to 40 and HMS Sultan will require in advance the Registration Numbers of cars and the names of people attending. Please let the Reception Desk have these details as soon as possible.

D-Day Memories by Bill Mansfield

The most exciting period of my schooldays was prior to the invasion of France in 1944. I remember walking home from school one winter's evening with a friend when we heard a strange noise coming from the direction of Chapel Street. Being curious we rushed to where the noise was coming from and ended up in Priory Road, where the Ramp is now, and there were two big dredgers close inshore making a large bay.

This was a great talking point in the village, especially when the junctions of Priory, Elson and St Thomas's Roads were dug up and about eighteen inches of concrete put in; we learned later that it was so that tanks wouldn't tear up the road surface when they turned the corners. Eventually lorries started to arrive loaded with brick rubble which they tipped over the sea wall, gradually moving out to meet the dredgers. This went on for a long time and it is true to say that the Ramp should be part of Portsmouth as half the bombed buildings of that city went into the making of it. I believe that it was one of the few times that the old Floating Bridge that crossed the harbour made a profit!

On top of the rubble were placed concrete blocks, moved into position by roller conveyors. When work stopped in the evenings we kids had great fun sitting on a shovel, rolling headlong down the Ramp and landing in a heap at the bottom. When the Ramp was completed a pier was built where the council pontoons are now; this consisted of five Dolphins connected by a spidery looking scaffolding.

After that there was a lull for a while until one day the village was swarming with Military Police erecting barriers across Priory Road, Chapel Street and Green Lane. All the inhabitants had to go to one of the big houses in Bury Road to be issued with passes to enable them to get in and out of what was now a Prohibited Area. They even put barbed wire out into the mud at the bottom of Quay Lane to prevent anyone getting in that way.

The next year was a schoolboy's dream of heaven - one long procession of Tanks, Guns, Lorries, Jeeps, D.U.K.W.s and vehicles of every kind practising for the big day. We used to climb over and inside these, run errands and scrounge badges from the troops of all nationalities which our mothers would sew on to an old jacket. After a while this would be covered with badges and some were real works of art.

Our parents used to make gallons of tea for the troops as they went by, and often they would ask if they could come in and have a wash and shave in return for a tin of Corned Beef or fruit - both luxuries then.

One morning someone noticed the vehicles were carrying live ammunition and we knew it was on. Sure enough the next day the landings in France were announced. After that the barriers and police disappeared and the traffic became two way - troops and supplies out and wounded and prisoners back.

One evening a forces concert party gave a show outside the fish and chip shop in Elson Road and the very popular George Formby was one of the performers.

At this time we used to stand in front of the barges full of troops and wait for them to throw us their last English pennies or better still for the Americans with cries of "got any gum chum" which for us in wartime was a treat. Some of us even managed to swop cigarettes for badges and helmets from the German prisoners who were kept in the camp in Mill Lane where there is now a housing estate.

After a while the bustle died away and the village became quiet again, except when I was lying in bed when I heard the sound of an unusual aircraft engine which sounded rather like a blowlamp. It was very low and disappeared in the direction of Fareham. I wondered what it was till I heard the news that the first German V1s had been fired at the south of England. There were quite a few after that and I remember one evening about a dozen going over and landing well inland. By this time we knew that all the time you could hear the engine you were all right and could watch it safely, but if the engine stopped look out!

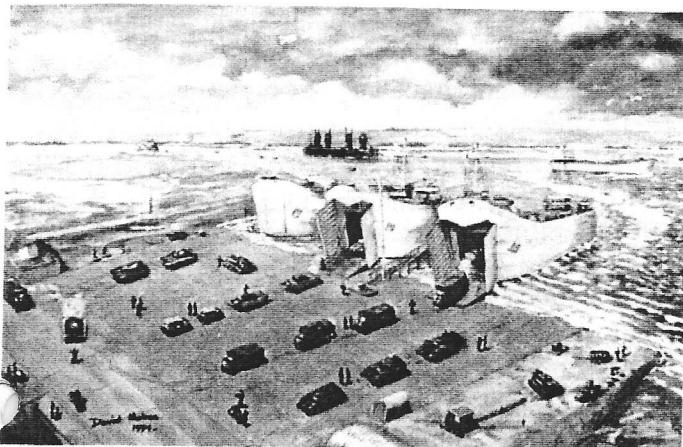
D-Day as the Newspaper Boy saw it by David Maber

In late 1943 and with no warning roads in Hardway and Elson became alive with human and mechanical activity. Gangs of men began to beaver away at reinforcing road junctions around Gosport. Returning home from school one day, barbed wire blocked off Priory Road, I later became the proud possessor of a pink pass that said it was OK to visit my home !! Next streetlight columns and telegraph poles were removed from pavements. Contractors removed some of the longstanding Lombardy poplar trees opposite Moby House; then a whole fleet of lorries dumped brick rubble on to a stretch of the shoreline. Everybody knew something big was afoot but no one asked questions.

By January 1944 the frequency of air raids had noticeably diminished. Folk held their breath when an air raid was followed by several days of peace and quiet; there was a creeping hope in most minds the German planes were never coming back.

One day a silence fell over the area. My pal and I sat idly on our front garden wall; the road was quiet. No vehicles. No military. Three army chaps wandered along the middle of the road towards us. When almost abreast of us I recognised the King, Mr Churchill and Monty. We followed them for some yards then broke off.

On about the 1st of June things happened with a startling suddenness. Priory Road began to fill with tanks, lorries, amphibious vehicles, Bren gun carriers and troops; Engines were switched off and shouted orders stopped. People emerged from their houses and struck up conversations, they dispensed tea, my paper round gave me an opportunity to see many vehicles in surrounding roads next morning. I had an overwhelming desire to hand over all my newspapers to the brave soldiers. A neighbour put up a sign "GOOD LUCK LADS SAFE AND QUICK RETURN".



On the 3rd June huge landing craft arrived at the ramp and the lines of war vehicles moved in fits and starts to the ramp for loading and embarkation - a truly fascinating sight. And so the loading of LSTs continued night and day for many weeks. My painting shows the ramp on the 3rd of June 1944.

I was alerted to the arrival of the first LST carrying wounded when a stream of ambulances passed through the road. Several times I witnessed wounded and dead soldiers being stretchered ashore. Arrival of the first prisoners on the 8th of June was equally dramatic; I thought they were an enemy invasion force as I came face to face with several hundred of them one morning.

George Formby was with an ENSA group that embarked in July.

My dog was with me one morning when the first Doodlebug over Gosport flew by sounding much like a motorbike.

One evening two friends and I noticed some Hessian had been fixed around the front of Hardway House. My pals helped me up on to the wall so I could take a peep, something I regretted doing as the garden was a temporary morgue covered with dead soldiers. As newspapers displayed the allied advance on Berlin, clearly, the end of the war was looming; "It will all be over soon," became the most popular phrase of the day. And people began to smile more.

(These are a few extracts from "D-Day as the Newspaper Boy saw it" by David Maber which is available from Methvens bookshop in Gosport High Street - the indelible memories of a 13 year old boy in 1944)

A WREN's Eye View of D-Day by Margaret Roberts

As a WREN during the second World War I served for quite a while on an old monitor called HMS Marshal Soult which was berthed some way inside the Dockyard at Portsmouth. It was a trawler base, and I was a pay writer in one of its cramped offices, keeping the pay accounts of some of the motor minesweeper crews.

During the early months of 1944 as I cycled through the Dockyard to and from work I became aware of a strange construction taking shape in one of the more distant dry docks. What could it be? No one seemed to know. As the towering construction neared completion we could see bollards at intervals round the top surface so it was obviously to provide mooring facilities of some kind. Only after the end of the war I heard about the Mulberry Harbours which were towed over to the French coast and used to such good effect by the Invasion Fleet. It was then I realised that I had watched part of one being built. Many other of course were built elsewhere including at Stokes Bay.

Then just before D Day as I cycled backwards and forwards, the yard seemed to be bursting at the seams as ships of all kinds occupied every possible nook and cranny. What a shock it was on the morning of the 6th June to enter a practically empty Dockyard. The many ships had disappeared overnight and there was an eerie silence in sharp contrast to the noise and bustle of the days before. The old "Marshall Soult" was still there though and on it work went on as usual.

Our little minesweepers were playing a leading role in the invasion. Together with many others from different parts of the country, in fact 25 flotillas of them altogether, their task was to sweep away the mines and lead the great invasion fleet safely to the beaches of Normandy. This was an unending task as each convoy bringing fresh troops and materials from Britain had to be swept across to the French coast, because the enemy was constantly sowing new mines in the cleared channels.

As the Allies advanced the minesweepers went too. They had to clear the liberated ports and harbours, and constantly came under fire from enemy shore batteries. They encountered many types of enemy mines as well as attacks by midget submarines, human torpedoes and explosive motor boats. Many minesweepers were lost during this hazardous undertaking. The only casualty among the group on my ledger was a sailor killed from gun shot wounds rather than by a mine. I vividly remember my feelings when I opened a parcel containing his few personal effects from Haslar Hospital. Then writing "Discharged Dead" in the ledger and working out the balance of pay due to his next of kin was a very sad task.

On a lighter note, when the boats returned to Portsmouth for a while, some of the men had, after going ashore in France, brought cosmetics home for their loved ones. "Powder and Paint" were like gold dust in this country and now and again the French variety found its way to us. I was given a French lipstick by one grateful sailor as a thank you for helping him with his Income Tax (his wife worked in a munitions factory). The lipstick was a very bright colour, very greasy and had an extremely strong smell (perfume is not the right word). Still, I appreciated the gesture. Duty free cigarettes were also sometimes on offer which if I remember correctly cost the sailor 6d (2.5p) for a packet of 20.

Many of the skippers had brought their own boats and peacetime crews into the Navy at the beginning of the war. As a result they were all friends on first name terms. So when the skipper had the opportunity to draw pay in France he might say "How much do you want Bill?" instead of checking the correct rate from Bill's pay book. These payments were then entered on a form S.1039 and sent to their home base. As you can imagine it became clear when I eventually received the forms for the ships on my ledger that some sailors were in for a rude awakening on their return. I did indeed feel like a "hard hearted Hannah" as one disappointed customer had dubbed me when I had to tell them they could only draw 10/- a fortnight (25p a week in today's money) till the debt was cleared.

Looking back makes me realise how little I and my fellow paywriters were aware of the exploits of those men in their little boats. Fortunately a very detailed account of their vital role is available in A Cecil Hampshire's book "The Lilliput Fleet" which was originally published in 1957.

Memories of D Day aboard LST 163 by Chris Peacey

Stormy weather, rain squalls, winds, darkening clouds, anything but summer weather - such was the scene on the eve of operation "Overlord". I was serving on LST 163, one of the hundreds of ships with no names that had huge holds in which to accommodate the maximum number of tanks, trucks, jeeps, guns and men for landing on enemy beachheads. We had already served on the North African and Italian campaigns until we were recalled from Anzio for the invasion of Normandy.

Directed to anchor off the Isle of Wight, early June saw us loading equipment of all shapes and sizes at Beach Street, Gosport. Then began the waiting game in company with an ever increasing armada of big ships and little ships. We were all packing tanks and vehicles down on deck with chains ready for rough weather - soldiers filling up any spare spaces, all good-humoured, loaded down with personal equipment and eager to be off.

From the 4th June the weather deteriorated with the lads suffering badly from sea-sickness. Remarks like "How can you stand it, let's get off this thing . . ." for most of these young and inexperienced soldiers, the cramped conditions and long confinement in a bucking ship was the worst kind of sensation. They couldn't understand how we "old salts" could tolerate such conditions. We did feel great compassion for them all because we did know the kind of hell fire they were likely to meet.

From the 4th June the weather worsened, but by midnight on the 5th/6th it was "Up Anchors" and we were off in a South Easterly direction. Our destination turned out to be SWORD beach - bombardment from the big ships thundered away, the black clouds raced overhead in light rain squalls, but we finally touched down.

My job as an electrician was lowering the heavy ramps and I watched as the troops waded through the cold bleak waters and then racing up the beach and away from us and on to land. Most of them were only too glad to be on land again and we exchanged the usual banter of good wishes - we would all need them.

There appeared to be little resistance from Sword Beach on that first run, meanwhile the armoured vehicles and tanks spluttered and coughed into life and off up on the beach. Now that our first load had been successfully landed it was up ramps and LST 163 was soon heading back to Hardway for reloading troops and equipment.

So Gosport and Hardway became our base and for the next three months we plied back and forth to several of the Normandy beaches, carrying supplies on the outward journeys, dodging and evading increasingly heavy bombardments and aerial attacks. Our luck always seemed to hold and we brought back wounded men to the ambulances waiting at Hardway while later on we brought back prisoners of war.

After three months LST 163 was withdrawn from Normandy and after vital repairs we were off again - this time to the Far East to support the Burma campaign and finally the re-capture of Singapore.

As I walk along Stokes Bay and view the waters of the Solent, with its backdrop of the Isle of Wight, I think of the hectic crowded scenes of June 1944 - all those men we transported - how many of them returned ?

How very privileged I am.

GOSPORT MUSEUM - JUNE - AUGUST 2004

Mid July - end August: An Exhibition prepared by the FGM aided by the Curator about **Aspects of Gosport's History** (Title still to be confirmed)

July 31st - The Exhibits gallery will be closed for transformation under the Discovery Centre plans

August 31st - The Coffee shop gallery will close for transformation under the Discovery Centre plans.

* Details of the alterations to the present layout of the Museum are fully explained in the Curator's article in the February Newsletter.

Friends of Gosport Museum Committee

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Joan Russell voted Gosport's Citizen of the Year

We are all delighted to learn that Joan has been voted Citizen of the Year - the ceremony confirming this will take place in Thorngate Halls on 30th June. Members will know that Joan is a founder member of the Friends of Gosport Museum and has served as Chairman, Secretary and during recent years as Project Director. She has initiated numerous projects and inspired many people in Gosport with her deep love and intimate knowledge of local history.

It is thanks to Joan's research and boundless energy and enthusiasm in promoting it that Gosport has been made aware of its foundation 800 years ago in 1204. Her booklet "Gosport 800", produced by the Friends of Gosport Museum, has been a tremendous success. How well she deserves this honour.

Please send contributions for the Newsletter to Bob Whiteley, the Newsletter Editor c/o Gosport Museum, Walpole Road, Gosport, Hampshire PO12 1NS

The views expressed are not necessarily those of the Hampshire CC Museums Service or its staff

Membership of the Friends of Gosport Museum is open to all - Please enquire at the Museum reception desk or ask any Committee member.

This Newsletter was printed and produced at Gosport Museum.