

VE Day – 8th May 1945 – and the End of the War

Victory in Europe Day, or VE Day, was a national holiday on 8th May 1945 to celebrate the formal acceptance by the Allies of Germany's unconditional surrender.

Memories of VE Day from village residents:

Daphne Sidell:

There were bonfires and things like that and Laws' shop had loads of fireworks that they'd kept all during the War, so we had fireworks.

David Clarke:

I remember VE day and we had a very big bonfire on the Common – below where the bus-stop is.

Ivan Whurr:

We did have celebrations after the war. I know Dad had a .410 and a lot of cartridges and we had a big bonfire near Beck Cottage there and he fired the gun up into the air, because you weren't allowed to do that or have a gun or anything at that time. And then, I don't know if it was when the Japanese, when that finished, but there was another big celebration under the chestnut tree. Mr Laws, who kept the shop, he had fireworks which he had before the war, and we had a big bonfire there and he had these fireworks.

David Lovewell (p.50 of the book of his memoirs "A Place in the Sun")

By the spring of 1945 there was much talk of the coming peace. As VE Day approached, it was decided there would be a bonfire and village dance on the Common. For weeks we collected garbage, wood, old tyres and brush from the farms until we had a giant pile that, once fired, could be seen for miles around.

That night the villagers gathered at dusk. A man named Nicky Notley had been selected as honorary fire-lighter. He had joined the Territorial Army in the mid-1930's and had swaggered his way first through peace and then the war, surviving front-line service, imprisonment and escape without a scratch. Decked out in the full private's uniform of khaki, topped with a beret, he was our star for the evening.

We waited for darkness to descend before starting the lighting ceremony. Nicky took up the large can of kerosene and poured out its contents on the edge of the pile. In all the excitement, he must have spilled some on himself because the instant he struck his cigarette lighter it was Nicky himself who was on fire. A great round of laughter went up as Nicky danced and shouted for help while the village elders scurried around in a panic and everyone gave instructions to extinguish the blaze. Finally he was smothered with someone's Home Guard overcoat. He'd burned his hands slightly and his hair was a little singed but he had no serious burns and nothing was going to stop him carrying out his ceremonial task. He again boldly put his lighter to the kerosene-soaked rubbish which flashed into flame. By now the actual bonfire was an anti-climax. ...

After the bonfire came a round of speeches and dancing at the village hall. Major Fellowes stressed there was no need to single out heroes for special commendation. Every person in Britain, man, woman and child, had done their part. Everyone nodded in agreement but then a village elder rose and said we had good reason to celebrate like this but the war wasn't over yet. There were still the Japanese to finish off, and we had one village lad in a Japanese prisoner of war camp [after his capture in Singapore]. The final celebrations could not be held until George Harmer was back home.

Once the crowd dispersed, Ivan and I ran ahead and switched on every light in the house. No more blackouts. No more air raids.

[David later describes that the Victory in Japan or VJ Day celebrations on 15th August 1945 did not involve a bonfire, although there was a dance and speeches in the village hall. But there was a sense of incompleteness as there was still no word about George Harmer. However soon afterwards, word came that he was alive and after several months he returned back home. "We did not recognize him as he was so painfully thin and his skin yellow. Whatever George had seen or heard or felt he never told us"].

Pat Whall, born 1927, a temporary resident of Shotesham during Covid-19 lockdown:

On VE day, we'd had a holiday but we had to go into the bank part of the time, and when I came home in the evening people had taken down all of their black curtains that had been up all during the war and it was just like fairy land. We looked down over Norwich from the bus that I was on and it was just like fairyland.