Life in the 1940s
War and Opportunity on the Border
Foreword

I would like to commend this book and accompanying exhibition which illustrates life in the 1940s in Newry, South Down and South Armagh.

Local people's reminiscences have been used to give an insight into how life was lived in this decade. Particularly poignant are the stories of those who lost loved ones during the War, but this is tempered with vivid recollections of the glamour and generosity of the American soldiers and the adventure of smuggling goods across the Border. The book's illustrations which range from photographs of evacuees, wartime weddings to ration coupons will stimulate memories as well as being a useful educational resource for schools.

In conclusion I would like to congratulate the staff of Newry and Mourne Museum for all their hard work and thank all those who contributed memories and photographs to this project.

Councillor Pat McGinn,
Mayor
Newry and Mourne District Council
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The Storm Clouds Gather

In the 1930s, Adolf Hitler and his National Socialist Party (the Nazis), rose to power in Germany. Their progress was fuelled by economic hardship and the harsh peace settlement which followed defeat in the First World War. Hitler vowed to re-build the economic, political and military strength of the German nation through rearmament and territorial expansion. The British and French governments, eager to avoid another war, chose to submit to many of the demands of the Nazi Party in a policy of “Appeasement”.

In March, 1938, the Union /Anschluss of Germany and Austria was proclaimed. In September, the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia was also transferred to Germany by the Munich Agreement. In return, Hitler declared an end to his territorial expansion. However, within several months, all of Czechoslovakia had come under Nazi control and on 1st September, 1939, the German army invaded Poland. Hitler ignored demands from Britain and France to withdraw his troops.

On 2nd September as European war appeared inevitable, Irish Taoiseach Eamon de Valéra declared Eire’s neutrality. The following day, British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain announced to the nation that War between Britain and Germany had been declared.

Throughout the Spring of 1940, the Nazis occupied Denmark, Norway, Belgium, France, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. Invasion of Britain, possibly through initial occupation of Ireland, appeared imminent. In May, 1940 Chamberlain was succeeded as Prime Minister by Winston Churchill. By the end of 1941, most of Europe was occupied, while only the United Kingdom and the neutral countries of Eire, Sweden, Switzerland and Spain remained free from Germany and her allies.

LOCAL MEMORIES

“Then came that dark damp morning on September 3rd 1939 when Neville Chamberlain (a name that didn’t mean a lot to us) announced on radio that we were at war with Nazi Germany. It didn’t mean a lot to us that day, except a sense of exhilaration. We were beginning a great new adventure.”
Northern Ireland and the War

Politics in Ireland had become increasingly polarised in the 60 years before the outbreak of the Second World War. ‘Home Rule’ demands for self government and independence from Britain strengthened from the end of the 19th century, while many, particularly in the north eastern counties, were opposed to ‘Home Rule’, desiring the retention of union with Britain.

Britain declared war on Germany on 3rd September 1939. As part of the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland was immediately involved, while across the Border, in Eire, a policy of official neutrality was pursued. Newry and Mourne was affected almost immediately. On the day war was declared, the passenger liner SS Athenia, en route from Belfast to Quebec, was torpedoed and sank off the coast of the Hebrides. Many of the 1400 passengers on board lost their lives, including some from the Newry area.

Air raid precautions which had been developed throughout the United Kingdom from 1938, in anticipation of the outbreak of war, were now implemented throughout Northern Ireland. These included the regulation of lighting, known as the Black-out Order, and a scheme for evacuation from urban areas. As the War progressed rationing was introduced due to the shortage of goods throughout the British Isles.

The early years saw the build-up of Allied troops in Ulster including a large influx of American troops in 1942. Although conscription was not introduced in Northern Ireland, thousands volunteered for military service and, despite its official neutrality, there were also thousands of volunteers from Eire.

As German invasion of Britain appeared increasingly likely from May, 1940, men were encouraged to join the Local Defence Volunteers (LDV) to protect their homeland. In 1941 the LDV was renamed the Home Guard. Women volunteers could join the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) and contributed to the war effort by working in factories and on the land.
In the early years of the War many felt that Northern Ireland was safe from German aerial attack, being beyond the range of German bombers. The Belfast Blitz of Easter, 1941, provided an horrific awakening.

Few areas of life in Northern Ireland were untouched by the Second World War.

**LOCAL MEMORIES**

“During the Second World War compulsory conscription was discussed by Churchill for Northern Ireland but they decided it would be more trouble than what it was worth.”
Local Defence

On 1st September, 1939, two days before War was declared, a blackout order was imposed to restrict lighting at night. New developments in warfare increased the risk of aerial attack and the blackout aimed to make cities and urban areas difficult to be seen from the air. The threat of such an attack necessitated extensive Air Raid Precaution plans. Black fabric was used to cover windows while car and bicycle lights were screened. Newry was one of the first towns in Northern Ireland to have special “starlight” street lighting. Those who did not maintain the blackout were fined and there were several such cases at the Newry and Kilkeel Petty Sessions. There was no blackout in Eire and at night, the southern side of Carlingford Lough remained lit while the northern side was in darkness.

Air Raid sirens and shelters were situated in Newry, Bessbrook, Kilkeel and Warrenpoint. Air Raid Precaution (ARP) wardens were appointed to ensure blackout was maintained and to advise and direct the population in the event of an aerial attack. Gas attacks were widely feared and gas masks were supplied from distribution points such as Kilkeel Courthouse, Newry Town Hall and a number of local primary schools. The Women’s Voluntary Service (WVS) was established as a support unit for the ARP. In Newry and Warrenpoint they assisted with the distribution of gas masks, organised recycling campaigns and also helped with evacuees, removed to the countryside from Belfast, which was considered more at risk from aerial attack than anywhere else in Northern Ireland. Home Front security was also maintained by the Local Defence Volunteers (LDV), more commonly known as the Home Guard.

Despite all the Air Raid Precaution warnings, advice and training, it was widely thought that Northern Ireland was outside the range of the bombers of the German Luftwaffe. This view was soon dispelled by the Belfast Blitz of April and May, 1941. Nearly 2000 people were killed and over 100,000 lost their homes. Some of the 180 German bombers involved were seen and heard flying over Newry. They flew across Carlingford Lough and followed the Canal to Belfast. Fire services in Belfast were so overwhelmed that crews from all over Northern Ireland, including Newry, were sent to assist. When he was informed of the horrific situation in Belfast, Irish Taoiseach, Eamonn de Valéra, also sent fire crews from Dublin, Drogheda and Dundalk. These green fire engines were seen travelling through Newry on their way to Belfast.
LOCAL MEMORIES

“My father was an Air Raid Warden. The idea was that all houses must be blacked out. If they saw a light, it was the job of the Warden to knock on your door and tell you to put out the light or draw down the blind.”
“Th e war didn’t impinge too much on us, although I do remember the air-raid siren would go off that was based in the town and it must have been a very serious thing because I remember my father and my brothers, they would get under the kitchen table and my mother and my sister and myself would go under the stairs. And my sister had the job of holding the blessed candle and my mother had her rosary beads, and I was there sitting on something and we were busy saying the rosary. A short time later, the all clear went and we all went to get out and my mother was sitting in the bucket, but in actual fact, she was stuck in the bucket. And I still have this memory, and I would only have been 6 at the time, of Kathleen and myself trying to heave my mother out of this bucket. And Kathleen was in absolute hysterics, trying to heave my mother out of the bucket.”

LOCAL MEMORIES
“Oh yes, sirens went off in Newry all the time. There was a siren on top of the Town Hall, it would a deafened you! You could hear it three miles away. You could hear the bombs dropping on Belfast here. We used to go up into the fields and watch the lights. I remember two of my female cousins were in the ARP. They used to go onto the roof tops and if any devices dropped they put sand on them. One of the girls were killed. I remember a fella used to sleep on the roof, and he was getting money for it. He told everybody about it. Some went up onto the hospital roof. They kept buckets of sand with them.”

“Newry Town was also beginning to change. Suddenly all over the town sprang up massive reinforced gun emplacements called pillarboxes. Streets and bridges were semi-blocked by ‘dragon teeth’ (metal and concrete blockades). The blackout was introduced and we had ARP wardens who made sure you didn’t show any lights. Car headlights were reduced to mere slits.”
LOCAL MEMORIES

“I was in the Home Guard. Well, we had a good uniform and black hobnail boots and a greatcoat . . . We also had a rifle but no live ammunition. We paraded maybe three or four times a year.”
Evacuees

As war became increasingly likely at the end of the 1930s, the United Kingdom began to prepare in various ways. New developments in warfare increased the risk of aerial attack to maximise widespread destruction. The threat of such an attack necessitated extensive Air Raid Precaution plans, part of which involved the evacuation of school children from major cities into the countryside. In Britain the fear of attack from German bombers encouraged parents to send their children to safety. During the first few days of September 1939, nearly 3,000,000 people were transported from major towns and cities to the countryside.

Like the rest of the United Kingdom, these measures were a fundamental part of preparations for war in Northern Ireland, although it was felt that aerial attack posed less of a threat to the Province than in Britain. ARP plans facilitated the evacuation of 70,000 school children from Belfast into the countryside of Northern Ireland. The Newry region was included as a destination for evacuees. Under the Government Evacuation Scheme children would be brought to destinations outside Belfast. The zones for evacuation were organised on the basis of the Board of Guardian Unions. Householders were paid for taking children: 10 shillings and 6 pence each week for those taking a single child and 8 shillings and 6 pence per child for householders taking more than one child. Reception of children, billeting and after-care was to be carried out by volunteers.

When war was declared many people from major British cities such as Coventry, Manchester and Glasgow moved to Northern Ireland and Eire to escape the prospect of aerial attack. Many of these were Irish people working in Britain returning to friends or family. The perception that Northern Ireland was safe from air raids also meant that the evacuation of children from Belfast proceeded with less urgency.

At least 1,446 children were expected in Newry in the first ‘wave’ of refugees on 8th September 1939. Few came and it was not until the following July that more significant numbers began to arrive. However, even these numbers were much less than anticipated. The Newry Reporter of 9th July 1939, reported that 134 children had arrived from Belfast the previous Sunday. A total of 409 children had been expected. Fifty private cars and six buses has been brought to convey the children to their destinations but the buses were not required. Forty children had also been expected at Bessbrook but only ten arrived.

Many of these evacuees went to “pre-selected billets” with friends or family. By the end of July the Newry Board of Guardians had reported that a total of 276 evacuees were resident the Newry Union and the Kilkeel Board of Guardians had over 200 in the Kilkeel district. Another 110 children were placed in and around Warrenpoint.
The numbers of evacuees coming out of Belfast into the countryside increased dramatically in the aftermath of the Blitz in April and May 1941. As many as 220,000 people fled the city seeking shelter in the countryside and villages of counties Antrim and Down. Many children and their families found shelter in the Newry region and local people still have memories of evacuees in their neighbourhood. As the threat of aerial attack receded, many children and families returned to Belfast with many friendships built up with local people during the war years coming to an end.

**LOCAL MEMORIES**

“Well just before World War Two started we went to live in England because my father and uncle had gone to work in England . . . We were only about two months there when war was declared . . . We got on a boat to come home . . . I remember coming into Belfast on a boat the morning war was declared . . .”

“There were some evacuees living behind us in Thomas Street . . . There was one particular fella, . . . he had no teeth either . . . we regularly got into scrapes with them. They were great wee scrapers, but it was just because they were strangers you know. But God love them, I mean they were moved away from Belfast and they didn’t know where the hell they were.”

“There were a few evacuees that came to Windsor Hill School. There was a Sammy Campbell that came from Belfast and then when the War was over he went away and I never heard from him again. I remember that particular name, because I was friendly with him. They were with families in the town.”
Belfast evacuees waiting to board a train to the countryside.
Troops in Newry and Mourne

The first fifteen months of the War saw the arrival of increasing numbers of British troops in Northern Ireland. This was initially to maintain internal security, but by May 1940, their function had changed to guarding against German invasion through Eire. The first British troops to arrive were units of the 53rd Welsh Division, some of which were stationed in Newry and Bessbrook and trained on Slieve Gullion. Many of these soldiers married local girls and later settled in the area. Other British regiments to come to the area include the Cheshire Regiment and the Northumberland Fusiliers.

After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941, the United States of America formally entered the War. The first American troops arrived in Belfast in January 1942 with the purpose of building new airfields to prepare for the arrival of further troops. Greencastle near Kilkeel, Co. Down, was chosen as the site for one of these airfields. Around 800 people were employed in the construction of the new aerodrome which opened on 30th July 1942. Over the next year the aerodrome proved invaluable as a stop over facility for aircraft and also became home to US Air Force units engaged in maintenance, training and flying operations. General Patton visited in March 1944 when he inspected his 5th Infantry Division in the Mournes. Local tradition has it that female nurses were asked to leave the platform so they would not hear his colourful language. American officers were billeted with local families throughout the area and many girls became GI brides.

Cyril Wiltshire from the 1/5th Welsh Regiment who was stationed in Newry.
In the last months of the war, troops from the Regular Belgian Army also arrived in Northern Ireland mainly for training. A Belgian Army dance band provided entertainment during many dances held in local Orange and Hibernian Halls to raise funds for returning troops and to celebrate the end of the War.

A number of large houses and estates in the area were requisitioned to accommodate the British and American troops. Camps, comprising the famous Nissan huts, were set up in the grounds of the estate for the troops while the officers resided in the main house. The owners were usually allowed to remain in residence but their movements around their own property were sometimes severely restricted! Examples of requisitioned houses and estates include Mourne Park, near Kilkeel (the seat of the Earls of Kilmorey), Narrow Water Castle, Warrenpoint, home of the Hall family and Mount Caulfield, near Bessbrook, owned by the Richardsons of the Bessbrook Spinning Mill. Drumláine House in Newry, was among the various urban properties taken over by the army.

LOCAL MEMORIES

“My mother was advised to take an Officer and his wife . . . He was a British Soldier at the station in Drumláine House but he lived with us and his job was involved with the American Soldiers at Ashgrove.”

“The First Regiment that came here was the 1/5 Welsh Regiment. Three fellas came to my mother’s house, and she would give them their supper at night. They came up just for a bit of craic . . . They used to have a parade every Sunday to church. There was a man walked along side the front of them with a goat. It . . . had a wee coat and everything with the Regimental colours. They went to St Mary’s Church of Ireland [Newry]. We would have gone down after Sunday School to watch the parade going past. The next crowd were the East Lancashires and the next thing was that the Yanks came to Mourne Park. The Americans were based in Drumbanagher, Dromantine, Ashgrove on the Belfast Road and Mourne Park.”

“The American army was based opposite where I was doing my apprenticeship. That was on Bridge Street, beside Water’s pub . . . They were all very good looking . . . they would always have sweets and nylons and what ever.”
LOCAL MEMORIES

“Greencastle was an American Base, it had storage for about 100 new B26 aeroplanes on the top of the hill there. They sat there with no camouflage and from the air they looked like four big lakes. There was a gunnery school down along the shore where they trained the pilots. On a winter’s day it was like a firework display.”

“You had the British Troops of course but then there were the Americans. The Officers Mess was in the Middle Manager’s house in Drumalane and the Administrative Headquarters was in Bridge Street. And of course there were jeeps and all flying around and it was fantastic. They asked a lot of families to take in and host a couple of soldiers, and we did host two soldiers, they used to call with use regularly and visited us... One of them was unfortunately killed on D Day. They were very nice men, they used to bring sweets and that.”

“The Americans had built special huts at Narrow Water Castle in Warrenpoint and they used lots of sites like Warrenpoint Golf Club. These American soldiers were very different from the previous English soldiers. They were smartly dressed and their “pants” were pressed and their pockets were attractive because they had a lot of money!... The children in Warrenpoint loved them as they has biscuits and sweets in their pockets which they distributed. And at Christmas time they took jolly good care to have a party for the children with ice-cream and other delicacies. But unfortunately, the vast majority of those American soldiers were engaged in the D-Day landings at Normandy.”

“I was living 3 miles outside Warrenpoint and I saw these two planes flying over and then I heard this almighty crash. So I went down to Warrenpoint on my bike and I realised the two planes had collided over the square. One had landed in Cunningham’s back yard and one in the sea by the baths. The pilots were killed but they seemed to have misjudged the distance between them as they approached. I remember talking to the curate who was along at the scene who found it the most unpleasant task.”

“I remember a very glamorous girl used to visit my mother, she was the life and soul of the party and she would go off with some American soldiers and there was great activity getting them civilian clothes in our house to go to Dundalk, then dancing in Blackrock. I remember he used to bring back a bottle of whiskey and it was very acceptable!”

The Earl and Countess of Kilmorey with their grandson, Nicholas Anley and two US army officers, at Mourne Park, Kilkeel.
War and Neutrality

Having achieved a measure of legislative independence within the Commonwealth, Eire was not subject to the foreign policy of the British government. While Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom was immediately involved in the Second World War, in Eire a policy of neutrality was pursued. On the day before war was declared between Britain and Germany, the Taoiseach, Eamon de Valéra, declared Eire's intention to remain neutral in the impending conflict. Legislation was introduced to amend part of the Irish Constitution, allowing a state of ‘Emergency’ to be declared.

As the war progressed and Nazi Germany occupied neutral countries such as Denmark and Norway, the Eire Government became increasingly worried about the threat of invasion. The Allied forces were also concerned that Eire would be used as a stepping-stone to invading Britain, and in response American and British troops were stationed near the Border. The Eire government began to build up its forces and the, Eire Minister for Co-ordination of Defence, Frank Aitken, attended meetings in Dundalk and elsewhere urging people to join local security forces, the ARP and Red Cross. Some 250,000 people were involved in defence roles.

Eire viewed its policy of neutrality with some flexibility. For instance British and US planes were permitted to fly over Eire territory in Donegal on their way to bases in Fermanagh and when British airmen crashed in Eire they were mostly escorted to the Border while German pilots were interned. During the Belfast Blitz de Valéra sent fire brigades from Dundalk, Drogheda and Dublin to assist in dousing the flames. Dublin was also bombed on a number of occasions, the worst incident was on the 31st May 1941 when 34 people were killed in the City’s North Strand area. Dublin was not the only city in Eire that was ‘accidentally’ bombed by the Luftwaffe; Cork and Wexford also experienced attacks as did Dundalk.

Both Northern Ireland and the Eire had censorship to varying degrees, for the North this was to safeguard national security while in Eire it was an extension of their neutrality policy. The Censorship Department in Belfast scrutinised every letter that came into Northern Ireland and any portions of text that might
harm or compromise the war effort were removed. People in Northern Ireland were aware of the progress of the War, but in Eire strict censorship of newspapers and radio kept public knowledge of events in continental Europe at a very low level. Death notices of Allied soldiers from Eire, who were killed in action, were also edited out of the newspapers. However, alternative War news could be obtained from broadcasts such as those by William Joyce, ‘Lord Haw-Haw’, a Nazi sympathizer who fled Britain at the outbreak of War. From a radio station in Hamburg he broadcast propaganda aimed at undermining the Allied war effort.

Despite official neutrality, over 150,000 Eire citizens were employed in the war effort as they sought work in British factories, while 40,000 joined the British forces.

**LOCAL MEMORIES**

“The news of course, the radio mainly and the newspapers, there was a lot of stuff they couldn’t print. Listening to Lord Haw-Haw “Germany Calling, Germany Calling”. He would have said, something’s wrong with the Green Clock [formerly located in Margaret Square] in Newry, it’s running half an hour slow. And I would have thought, “How the hell did he bloody know!” and then you had the news in the cinema. But it was only in later years after the war that you realised how little you knew.”

“It was during the big Blitz in Belfast, a request was made to the south to help fight the fires and Dev [Eamon De Valera] ordered the fire brigade from Dublin and Dundalk and I remember them, and we were cheering when we saw the big green fire engines flying past. Then two or three days later they came back with tea chests and white bread they had been given. You see these things were in short supply in the south at this time.”

“Across the Border, it was common to meet a chap with a foreign accent and a very close haircut, whom we soon learned [was] German. Of course Eire was neutral and many of the German Embassy staff spent a lot of time around Dundalk for very obvious reasons.”
LOCAL MEMORIES
“Actually a landmine was dropped at the quay [Dundalk].... It blew a hole twenty feet deep in the ground .... But there was two bombs, three bombs dropped on the Carrick [macross] Road as well. But actually my wife’s father was just after passing that place and he was knocked flat with the bomb on the night it exploded.”

Reminiscence of an Irish soldier who was based in the Curragh Camp, outside Dublin:

“The only thing that happened in my time was a couple of German pilots landed and they were taken prisoner.”.
Life on the Home Front

The War had an effect on many different aspects of social and economic life on both sides of the Border.

During the 1930s, industry in Newry had been badly hit by economic depression and the decline of the inland canal.

The outbreak of war brought great change and in most cases, positive economic results. Large numbers of people were employed in factories, in the construction of defence structures and the production of materials for the armed forces. Bessbrook Spinning Mill produced 22,323,365 yards of cloth for use in the manufacture of tents and uniforms. Smith & Pearson, an engineering firm based at Merchant’s Quay in Newry produced steel tanks which were used in the construction of Mulberry harbours. The firm moved to Warrenpoint and began to produce landing craft which were eventually used in the D-Day landings of June, 1944 when Allied forces began retaking control of Europe.

As the War progressed and imported foodstuffs became increasingly restricted due to German blockades, home food production became vital. Under the Government’s compulsory tillage policy, farmers were set a target quota of crops to grow and cultivate. Often, farmers were given subsidies to help them to achieve this, especially if it required increased mechanisation such as the use of tractors.

Materials were in short supply during the war years and there was extensive recycling of goods for the war effort. Paper was recycled to make books and newspapers. Like most places, Newry and Warrenpoint had a ‘Wings for Victory’ campaign, where people were encouraged to give their scrap metal to reach a certain target, to “Build a Spitfire Scheme”.

Although travel was restricted, there were still plenty of occasions for social gatherings. Many of these took place in local halls in Newry, Bessbrook and Warrenpoint. Special dances were held – often with music supplied by the band of the Belgian army, many of whose troops were based in the area in the latter years of the War. Jumble sales and competitions were also held to help raise funds for the War Hospital Supply Depot and for the “Welcome Home” fund towards the end of the war. Many of these events were organised by specially established women’s committees such as the Women’s Volunteer Service (WVS). Newspapers were full of recipes and advice for the wartime wife and mother.
Life in the 1940's: War and Opportunity on the Border

Women's Volunteer Service outside Newry Town Hall
LOCAL MEMORIES

“Warrenpoint was engaged from about 1943 onwards in building landing craft and they won the prize for the fastest construction of landing crafts for Normandy. They were churning these out every couple of months. During this time people were coming to Warrenpoint from all over Ireland and the wages were very good and it was a very prosperous time.”

“We were encouraged to save, particularly the school children, first of all buying savings stamps and then they were turned into Ulster Savings Certificate and the thing was Wings for Victory and they were to buy among other things, Spit Fires. I don’t know how many times we met up at Trevor Hill and there was a target board and it showed how much we had gathered from the last time.”

“The government paid us money to grow more flax.”

Letter from the Earl of Kilmorey to Frederick Barry, Petroleum Officer, August, 1943
PRONI: D2638/D/82/11

“I am most anxious to obtain a supply of petrol for agricultural and other work on my farm here . . . . We have present: 10 acres in flax, 18 acres in oats, 6 acres of potatoes, and, with other land to be taken in, there will be altogether seventy/eighty acres under cultivation as soon as we can get the ground broken up and prepared. We estimate fifty gallons per week (lorry mileage eight/ten miles per gallon) to ensure full time work on the farm, and at timber and quarries, and a log could be kept to record the work carried out.”
The War also impacted in rather more unexpected ways, as an article in the Newry Reporter in February, 1945 made all too clear:

LOCAL MEMORIES

“On Thursday afternoon, Mrs. Jos Brown, ‘Brookside’, Cloughrea, Bessbrook, had rather an exciting time and a very profitable one as far as the authorities are concerned, for her coolness and presence of mind enabled them to recapture 2 of the German prisoners who escaped from an internment camp . . . Mrs. Brown invited them inside and enquired if they would have some tea . . .

“When they were comfortably seated at the meal, Mrs. Brown sent a boy, Gerald Niblock, who assists her husband on the farm, down to the licensed premises of Mr. William Muldrew, ‘Birkenhead’, Millvale, who telephoned the Bessbrook police. . . . During the meal and before the police had arrived the prisoner, whose master of our ‘lingo’ had evidently carried him so far, asked Mrs. Brown for a map showing the distance to Newry and Dundalk in “Free Ireland”. However the arrival of the MPs saved him the bother of studying any map.”
Rationing and Smuggling

The German army successfully invaded much of mainland Europe by Spring 1940. Transport routes became heavily restricted, as they were now mostly under Nazi control, resulting in shortages of foodstuffs, clothing and petrol in Britain and Ireland. In response to these shortages rationing was introduced in mainland Britain in November 1939, and in January 1940, to Northern Ireland. The system aimed to ensure that everyone got a fair share of scarce resources. Following registration everyone was issued with a ration book. Set amounts of foods were allocated to each person on a weekly basis through the use of coupons which were exchanged for goods in shops.

Everyone was urged to produce vegetables and foodstuffs on their land and farmers were encouraged to grow crops which had previously been imported such as barley, oats and wheat. As most of the clothing factories had to concentrate on making uniforms for the forces, there was a limit on the amount of clothing produced for sale in the shops. People had to ‘make do and mend’. Men were encouraged to wear austerity suits which had fewer pockets and no turn ups on the trousers. Women’s skirts and dresses were also made shorter, and instead of wearing stockings women often stained their legs with tea, and drew lines on the back of their legs to resemble a stocking seam. There was almost always a continual shortage of fuel, and gas and electricity supplies were often cut.

Due to its agriculturally-based society, food resources in Northern Ireland were more plentiful than the rest of Britain. Cross-border smuggling was also rife, as shops in the villages on the southern side of the Border were relatively well stocked, particularly in the early years of the War. Goods, which were in short supply on one side of the Border, could be exchanged for items that were more plentiful on the other side. Many local people have memories of going over the Border to Omeath once a week by car, bicycle, train or the Red Star Ferry Service and bringing back cheese, bacon, jam, chocolate, cigarettes and lighters.

The War also highlighted Eire’s economic dependence on Britain as her merchant ships had to receive allocations of coal at British ports. As the War progressed and shortages of coal, oil and petrol worsened, alternative sources of fuel had to be found. Trains were run on turf, timber and straw, and private cars were rarely used, replaced by bicycles or pony and traps. Gas was rationed in the cities and a gas inspector or ‘glimmer man’ would check that gas was not being wasted. Turf was cut and stored in stacks 30 feet high in Phoenix Park for use by the Dublin public.

The local newspapers during the war years are peppered with references to people being fined for smuggling. A Newry Reporter of August 15th 1940 records a local man fined £35 for smuggling sugar from Eire, while other fines ranges from hundreds of pounds to a few shillings. Not everyone was caught, however, as the following reminiscences illustrate:
LOCAL MEMORIES

“Well, there wasn’t much in the line of butter so you had margarine and a lot of people went over the Border, but they were taking a chance and you may not have got any. Bananas were very rare. Then they had spam. I thought it was quite nice when it was fried. The meat was rationed. But we seemed to manage all right. And you got what they called concrete butter which you had to ration. It came into some of the shops in Newry. It must have been homemade . . . There never was a great shortage of bread really and a lot of people grew their own vegetables.”

“Food rationing was very strict, although in Newry we didn’t do too badly. Eire, being neutral, was not at war and only a few miles away. There were packed trainloads everyday going to Greenore, and well-packed bags on the way back. The customs officers mostly turned a blind eye. Tea was in very short commodity in Eire and I can well remember certain ‘smart boys’ drying the tea from the pot rowing across at Narrowater and swapping it for butter on the Eire shore. Of course, if the customs man was waiting for you on the way back the only thing to do was to ‘drop it’. Many a load of butter floated out to sea in Carlingford Lough.”
LOCAL MEMORIES

“During wartime shortages there was always plenty in Omeath. At that time the trains would come down at the weekend to Warrenpoint. There were so many on the trains and the queues were very long although orderly and they would go over to Omeath on the Red Star Ferry Service. A lot of the women came back looking heavily pregnant and customs would be very interested in them! They eventually supplied a woman searcher. And when the people were searched, they came out and all the bulk was gone. I have no idea where all the contraband goods would have gone to.”
Local Heroes

Over 38,000 men and women from Northern Ireland enlisted during the Second World War, while a similar number from Eire also joined the British military services. Newry and Mourne made a significant contribution to the war effort, and many people from the area were involved in active service during the War.

There was involvement on all fronts during the War. An army recruitment office opened at 97 Canal Street in Newry and adverts in local newspapers encouraged enlistment in one of the armed services. Men from the area joined the RAF, Royal Navy and Army and were involved in active service as far a-field as Africa and the Far East. The Merchant Navy was also called upon to assist in the war effort, and as the German Army swept through western Europe in the spring of 1940, they participated in the rescue and evacuation of allied soldiers from Dunkirk in France.

Women were not exempt from military service and many joined the Women’s Royal Navy (WRNS) and the Women’s Auxilliary Air Force (WAAF). Others joined the Women’s Voluntary Service (WVS) whose efforts ranged from raising funds for the return of local men from Prisoner of War camps in Germany and Japan, to distributing gas masks, helping with evacuee children and organizing food and clothing parcels to be sent to troops stationed overseas.

A number of men from the Newry region played a part in some famous episodes of the War. Robert Caldwell of Cowan Street, Newry was one of eight men from Northern Ireland serving on HMS Exeter which was involved in the Battle of the River Plate, off the coast of Uruguay in December 1939. This sea battle led to the destruction of the Graf Spee, a German raider, which had been causing havoc to British shipping in the early months of the War. After the battle, Caldwell telegraphed his mother simply saying “Fit and well. Bob”. When he returned home on leave in March 1940, Caldwell was feted as a ‘local hero’, receiving a gold watch from the Young Men’s Institute in Newry and being presented, with others who had served on HMS Exeter, to Lord Craigavon, the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland.

The evacuation of Allied Troops from Dunkirk in June 1940 also saw the involvement of local service men. Bernard Murphy from Cloghogue and Terry O’Hanlon were among the crew of the Dorrien Rose, a tramp steamer, which made two trips across the English Channel rescuing 1600 men. Murphy, the Chief Engineer, and O’Hanlon, the First Mate, were subsequently decorated for their services. Among those rescued at Dunkirk was Major G.W. Reside, an architect from Newry. A member of the...
British Expeditionary Force, Major Reside was in an anti-aircraft artillery unit and was reputedly one of the last soldiers to be evacuated.

Many of the men and women from Newry and Mourne who enlisted never returned home and local people still have heart-rending stories to tell of the loss of family members. One of those to die on active service was Michael Flood Blaney, the son of Charles Blaney, Town Surveyor in Newry. Blaney had joined the Royal Engineers Bomb Disposal Unit on 5th December 1940. He was killed a few days later while defusing a bomb at Manor Park in Essex. Second-Lieutenant Blaney was awarded the George Cross posthumously by King George VI in April 1941. Among local Royal Navy personnel lost at sea during the War was Petty Officer John Felix O’Connell from Camlough in south Armagh. He was among the 1,415 men who died in the sinking of HMS Hood in the Denmark Strait on 24th May 1941. This was the greatest single shipping loss of the War.

A full list of those who lost their lives has been compiled and published in Newry’s War Dead edited by Colin Moffett and published by Newry and Mourne District Council in 2002.
The war service of a local member of the WAAF:

LOCAL MEMORIES

“She was a qualified mechanic and electrician. It was her job to look after the engines for the Battle of Britain. If an engine conked out and it wasn’t a bullet, she would have been court-martialled. She had to work all through the night and make sure the engines were in working order”.

Bernard Murphy and Terry O’Hanlon who served on the Dorian Rose
Pat Golding on the loss of his father Bernard Golding, a Merchant Seaman. He was Chief Engineer of the Walnut which was lost in the Irish Sea in 1941:

**LOCAL MEMORIES**

“I can remember, it wasn’t the excitement in the house, but the number of people. My younger brother and sister, we were upstairs in bed and my younger brother and myself we could see looking down from the landing and wondering what was going on. I can still see the priest and the policeman”

Eileen Murphy on the experiences of Bernard Murphy, her father, Chief Engineer of the Dorrien Rose at Dunkirk:

**LOCAL MEMORIES**

“They worked so hard on my father’s ship that they saved every man and he always said ‘They were some mothers child’ and he had the pleasure of helping to save them . . . He said ‘It was like a burning hell; even the water was on fire’. But he was very lucky and he was delighted that they were all saved.”
The End of the War

After Allied invasion of Europe in the D-Day landings of June, 1944, the tide steadily turned in the Allies’ favour. By Spring, 1945, the end of 6 long years of war appeared in sight. From this period, a number of “Welcome Home” fundraising events such as dances and jumble sales took place from Bessbrook to Kilkeel, in Town Halls, schools, Orange Halls and Hibernian Halls.

Gradually, the ARP Service and the Home Guard stood down. Hitler died on May 3rd, 1945 and within several days, Germany’s surrender was reported. May 8th was designated Victory in Europe (VE) Day and a number of celebrations were organised. A Victory Parade was arranged for Newry with bands, bonfires and sports events at the Intermediate School. A number of Thanksgiving Services took place and on 10th May, Newry Town Hall was the venue for a concert and the relaying of Prime Minister, Winston Churchill’s radio broadcast. Bunting was displayed for street parties and crowds gathered at Trevor Hill to hear the Victory Announcement and the King’s speech. In Warrenpoint, a “Victory Run” and tea in the Mournes was arranged, while parades, dances and bonfires also took place in Poyntzpass, Bessbrook and Kilkeel. The local councils were granted permission from the Ministry of Defence to spend up to £100 on VE Celebrations.
Following the Japanese surrender, Victory in Japan (VJ) Day on 15th August confirmed the War had truly ended. As Prisoners of War and men and women demobbed from the forces returned, further “Welcome Home” events and presentations were arranged. For all too many families experiencing loss, life would never be the same again.

The years following the War witnessed many changes. From 1947, the Education Act provided free and compulsory education up to the age of 15, while the National Health Service, extended to Northern Ireland in 1948 made medical treatment free and available to all. In Newry, a scheme of house building created housing in Rooney’s Meadow, James Connolly Park and in the Daisy Hill, Monaghan Row area. In 1952, electric street lighting was introduced and Newry became the first town in Ireland to be completely lit by electricity. Gradually, wartime restrictions were lifted, although shortages of goods remained and rationing continued through to the mid 1950s. Eire also experienced post War change and in 1948 was officially renamed the Irish Republic, removing itself from the British Commonwealth.

LOCAL MEMORIES
“Eventually the war ended and peace returned. After all the celebrations we found it wasn’t much different from other years. There was still rationing and shortages but at least many of our ‘mates’ came home again. Some had changed a lot and many would never work again but gradually Newry returned to normal. The war years had good and bad memories, but let’s hope we never have to live through them again.”