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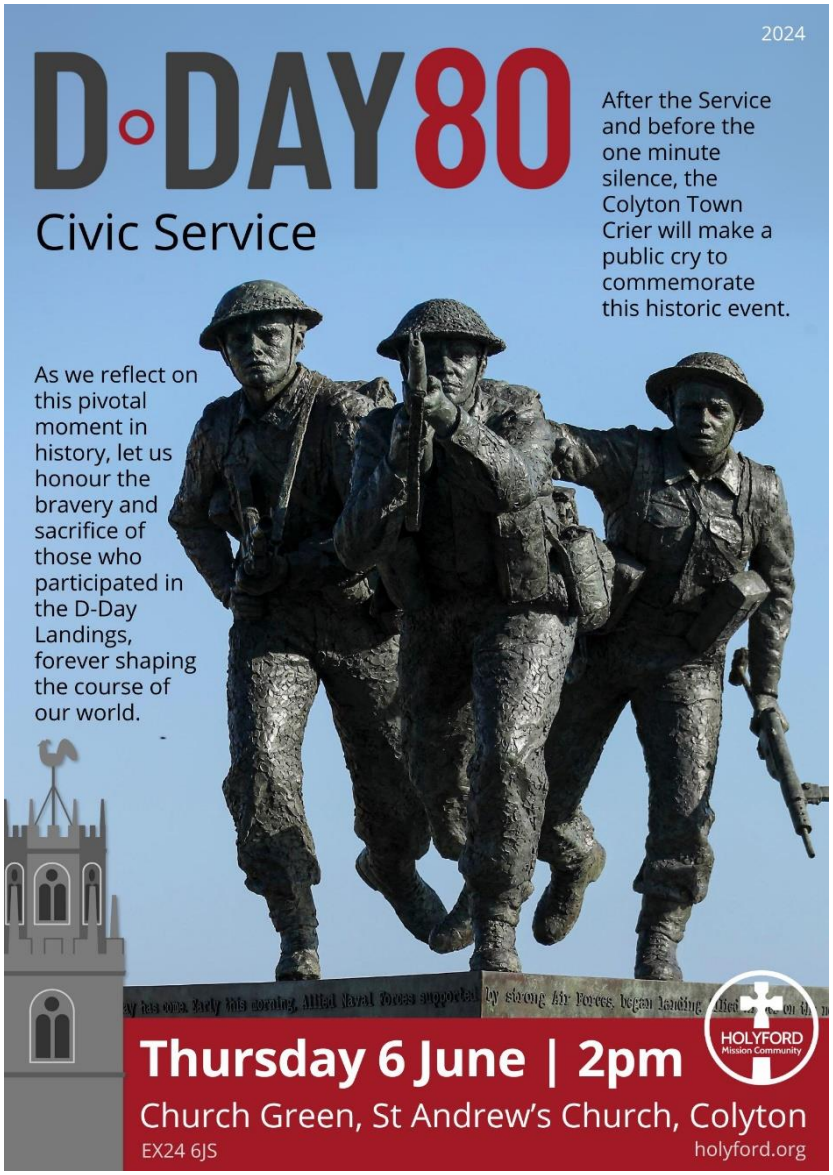
29 May 2024

Colyton Parish History Society Newsletter

Question: In this month's Newsletter we are looking to remember and commemorate the 80th anniversary of D Day which occurs on 6 June 2024. NB Do you know what D-Day actually stands for? (Answer – at end.) There is also a follow up article on our visit to see the tiles from Newenham Abbey now held by RAMM.

1. News – Church Service to mark D Day 80 – 2pm 6 June 2024



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a. Remembering D-Day – June 6 1944 – Lest we forget! –

by Sarah Charman

At a time when the world is once again in a perilous state with war in the Ukraine, devastating violence in the Middle East and multiple conflicts in Africa and around the world it is important we take time to remember the terrible cost of what happened in WW2. The following article looks at what was happening here in East Devon and the Blackdown Hills in the run up to D-Day.

Preparations for D-Day

By 1943 East Devon and the area of the Blackdown Hills was particularly heavily involved in planning for D-Day. The Axe valley as it flowed down to the sea was regarded as a key target point for a potential German invasion. All signposts had been removed early on and Colyton was effectively a closed area. Any unknown visitors were viewed with suspicion and detained.

On the ground - Feoffees/Parish Council

Here in Colyton in that Spring of 1944, the civil authorities such as the Parish Council worked to ensure that the regular rhythms of everyday life continued to run smoothly and calmly along predictable lines. And that was important for maintaining community morale.

The Colyton Chamber of Feoffees' charity – by then almost 400 years old - was dealing primarily with problems associated with maintaining the water supply to the town for which they had been responsible since 1647. Donations were made to provide clothing to be sent to individual prisoners of war and support was given to evacuees sent to Colyton to get away from the German bombings of London, and social events to raise funds for the war effort. Storage of oil cake in the Town Hall finished in March 1944 and complaints were received that the Hall's blackout arrangements were inadequate. The Town Hall was used for the distribution of ration books and the WI was also permitted to use the kitchen for jam making. In the run up to D-Day, with Colyton crammed full of soldiers who were billeted here awaiting transportation to Normandy, a pragmatic decision was taken to keep the town's men's toilets open all night - although the ladies toilets were closed at 10 pm!

Some years ago Roy White recalled the atmosphere here in the town in the run up to D-Day. He remembered that there was a lot of activity and the townsfolk witnessed the many gliders being towed out overhead on practice runs for the troop drop: then all of a sudden the town emptied and it was quiet. D-Day had arrived!

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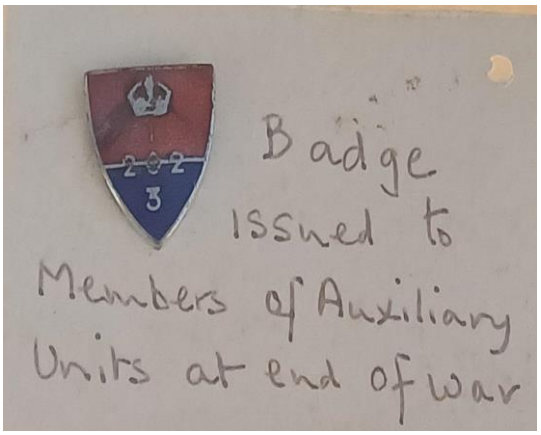
Below the surface – literally - it was a very different picture!

Auxiliary Units

In 1940, the Home Guard was formed and here in Devon the units made regular patrols of the beaches along the Jurassic coast where a German invasion was anticipated. At the same time a highly secret, resistance operation with the vague title of "Auxiliary Units" was also established. Their function, as distinct from the Home Guard, was to provide small bodies of men specially selected and trained whose role, in the event of invasion, would be to act offensively on the flanks and in the rear of enemy troops where their main targets would be vehicles, ammunition dumps, small enemy posts and stragglers. These activities would involve the use of a variety of weaponry including explosives, knives, sniping rifles and other firearms. A further function was to provide a system of intelligence concerning enemy activity behind the latter's own lines. Each unit would be unknown to its neighbour.

In 2007 students from Colyton Grammar School and their history teachers conducted a remarkable interview – link attached below - with Mr Walter Denslow, then aged 92 and living in Axmouth, about his time in the Axe Valley AU.

Mr Denslow recalled what was actually going on below ground and here in the woods surrounding Colyton, at sites like Morganhayes Cover, as the planning for D Day went on in late 1943 and 1944. He explained that the first step for each unit was to construct an underground Operation Base out of a Nissan Hut, where they were to gather immediately following the anticipated invasion. They received training in the use of arms and other tactics and would frequently patrol 5 or 6 miles a night in the dark and on foot.



This is part of the territory over which Walter Denslow and his comrades regularly roamed (a very detailed 1:2500 relief map created by the local Home Guard, once on display in Axmouth Church; it bears the title "Axmouth Platoon Area" and the name of its creator: H.R. Owen, 1943)

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The intention was that following an invasion they would emerge from their OB to harass and attack the enemy's rear with a range of weapons from guns to explosives intended to cause as much disruption as possible to the German advance by destroying tanks etc. After the War, many of the AU members transferred to the SAS, having acquired many of the necessary skills by then.

file:///D:/Staffs%20Home%20Guard%20Memories%20110%20Auxiliary%20Unit%20Axe%20Valley%20Walter%20Dellow.htm

At sea

Meanwhile the airbase at Dunkeswell in the Blackdown Hills was being used by the US Navy for flights to combat the German U Boat threat in the Channel. The first US Navy patrol squadron arrived at Dunkeswell at the end of September 1943. Conditions were not good. Persistent rain and wind whipped up the soil turning it to mud which led to the airfield becoming nicknamed 'Mudfield Heights' by the Americans. The US Navy remained there until the end of May 1945.

All Squadrons at Dunkeswell participated in Operation Cork in support of the invasion of Normandy. This involved maintaining 15 aircraft in an operational status for the duration of the D-Day landings and provided patrols over the southern entrance to the English Channel to prevent German U-boats from approaching the invasion fleet. Aircraft patrolled the area at 30 minute intervals with the result that the invasion fleet and subsequent re-supplies were not attacked by U-Boats.

During the War they attacked 65 U Boats, sinking 7 and damaging 11 and taking the surrender of another 5. The US Navy also lost 23 aircraft and 178 men and were regularly attacked by the Luftwaffe. As a result of their efforts thousands of merchant seamen's lives were saved and millions of tons of vital supplies got through to Great Britain.

There is a Heritage Centre at Dunkeswell airfield which is well worth a visit. Contact www.southwestairfields.co.uk or 0777 885 7722

In the air

The 101st US airborne division was based at nearby Smeatharpe, also located in the Blackdown Hills near Upottery. In May 1944 practice runs were being made in preparation for Operation Neptune and crews were taught how to detect the drop zone in France. A dress rehearsal was organised for 10 May.

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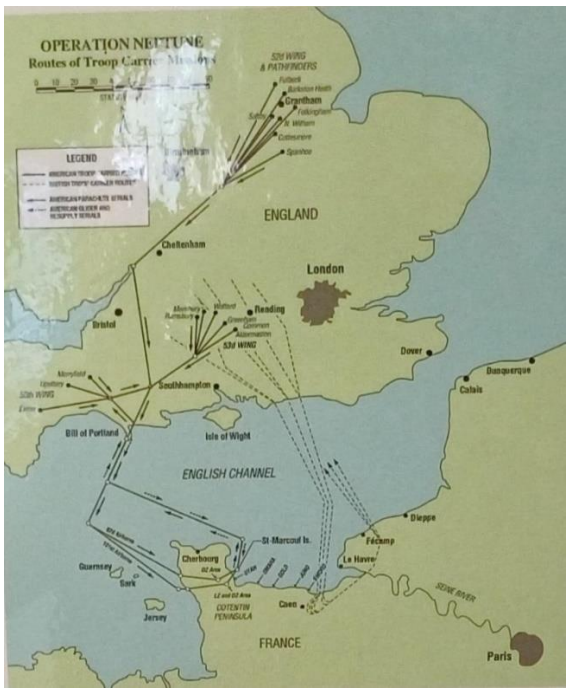
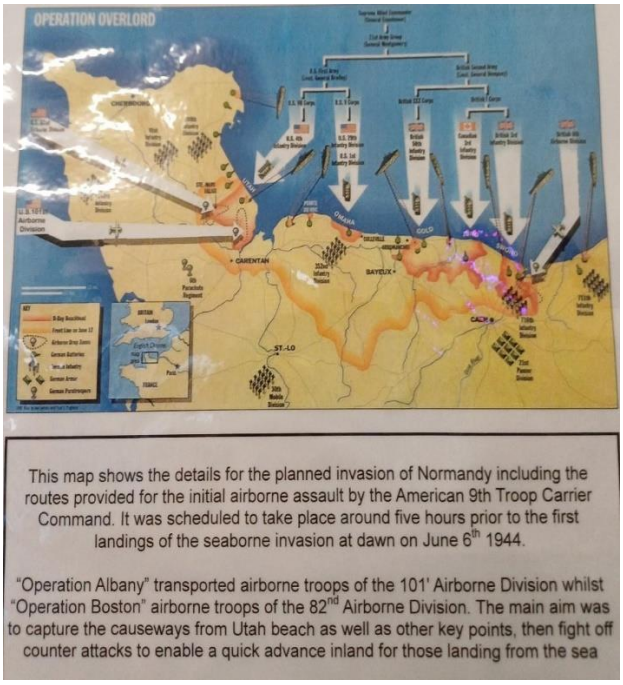
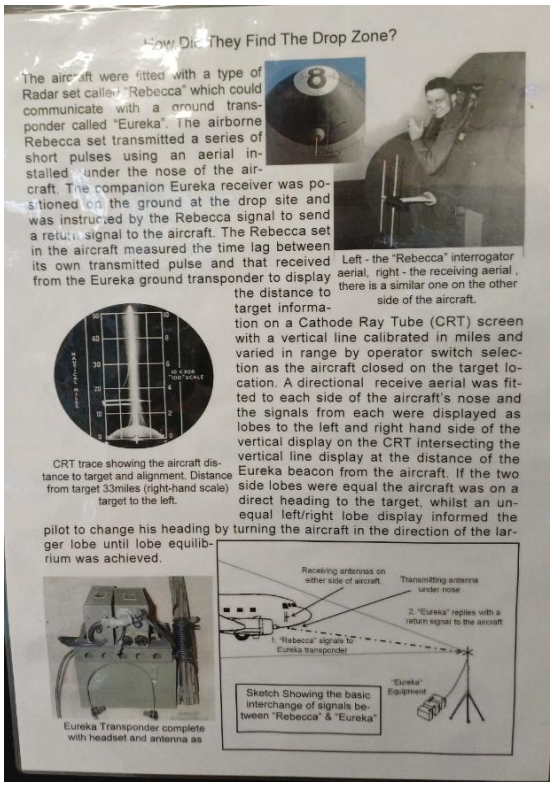




This map shows the details for the planned invasion of Normandy including the routes provided for the initial airborne assault by the American 9th Troop Carrier Command. It was scheduled to take place around five hours prior to the first landings of the seaborne invasion at dawn on June 6th 1944.

"Operation Albany" transported airborne troops of the 101' Airborne Division whilst "Operation Boston" airborne troops of the 82nd Airborne Division. The main aim was to capture the causeways from Utah beach as well as other key points, then fight off counter attacks to enable a quick advance inland for those landing from the sea

The maps above which are on display at Smeatharpe show the planned flight routes and detailed plans for the invasion of Normandy.



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D-Day

The Operation was planned to be launched on 5 June but had to be delayed for 24 hours due to the weather forecast.

D-Day commenced with Operation Neptune (Normandy landings). A final briefing was given at Smeatharpe just minutes before midnight on 5 June and Operation Overlord (invasion of Normandy) began at dawn on 6 June 1944.

Josh Logan of the US 50th Troop Carrier Wing Intelligence who was present at the briefing, later recalled that the control tower was packed that night. The planes were heavily laden with paratroopers and their equipment.

"*As they came lumbering by, you had a terrible feeling that they weren't going to get off the ground. Everybody was so nervous but when the first plane flown by Colonel Young and his crew rose about two feet off the ground cheering erupted - mix of relief and vengeance*."

On his return from the mission US Colonel Young reported that

"*As we approached the drop zone, the machine gun fire and flack began increasing and a plane in our 45 C47 serial flown by 2nd Lt Marsten Sargeant was shot down. The intense flames from the gasoline fire lit up the lower cloud level above us and gave an eerie orange yellow cast to the formation and to the scene below.*

"Machine gun fire with yellow tracers came from the right rear where we crossed the railroad. The tracers went by the nose of my ship so thick at this point that they lit up the inside of the cockpit."

Just reading the statistics now, 80 years later, the sheer scale of the task is mind blowing: Operation Neptune was nine planes wide and five hours long. The groups had to be coordinated from dozens of air bases across England so that they would mesh into a solid train. The naval armada that would follow was even more awesome. Following the launch of the invasion Stalin was quoted as saying that never in military history had the world witnessed anything as grandiose or spectacular.

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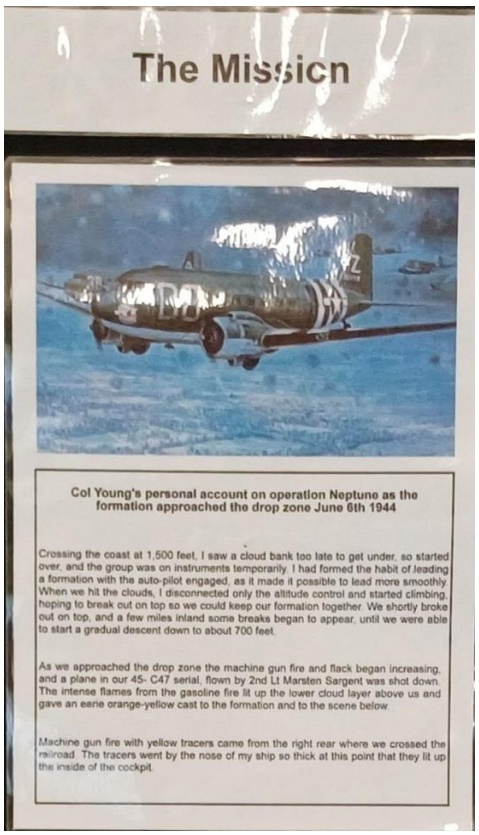
Josh Logan of the 50th Troop Carrier Wing Intelligence, was part of the briefing team to the 439th TC Gp. This is his description of the departure of the 81 C47' s on Operation Neptune from Upottery at 15 minutes to midnight June 5th 1944

The control tower was absolutely packed with every one in the outfit. That was the only way you could see the take-off. These planes were heavily loaded. Not only were the paratroopers jammed in but also they had all kinds of guns of various sizes, explosives of all sorts and all kinds of equipment. As they came lumbering by, you had a terrible feeling that they weren't going to get off the ground. Every body was so nervous but when the first plane flown by Col Young and his crew rose about two feet of the ground, cheering erupted a mix of relief and vengeance.



For the ground crews at Smeatharpe on June 6, several hours later when the planes returned from their drop mission over Normandy they had to immediately examine them for damage and repair them. At least 50 C47 planes each from Smeatharpe and another base at nearby Merryfield had to be made ready for Operation Hackensack the next day when they would tow 20 Waco and 30 British built Horsa gliders laden with nearly 1000 troops, five vehicles, 11 tons of ammunition and ten tons of other supplies on another mission to France.

Today there is a small heritage centre in a Nissan hut at Smeatharpe, staffed by eager volunteers with an impressive display of memorabilia including photographs, eyewitness accounts of the planning for D-Day and operations and artifacts. They kindly gave me permission to photograph these items. Their exhibition about D-Day is well worth a visit. Contact as Dunkeswell www.southwestairfields.co.uk or 0777 885 7722

Leadership

On 6 June 1944 General Dwight D. Eisenhower, who would later be elected as the 34th President of the United States in 1953, was Supreme Commander of the Allied

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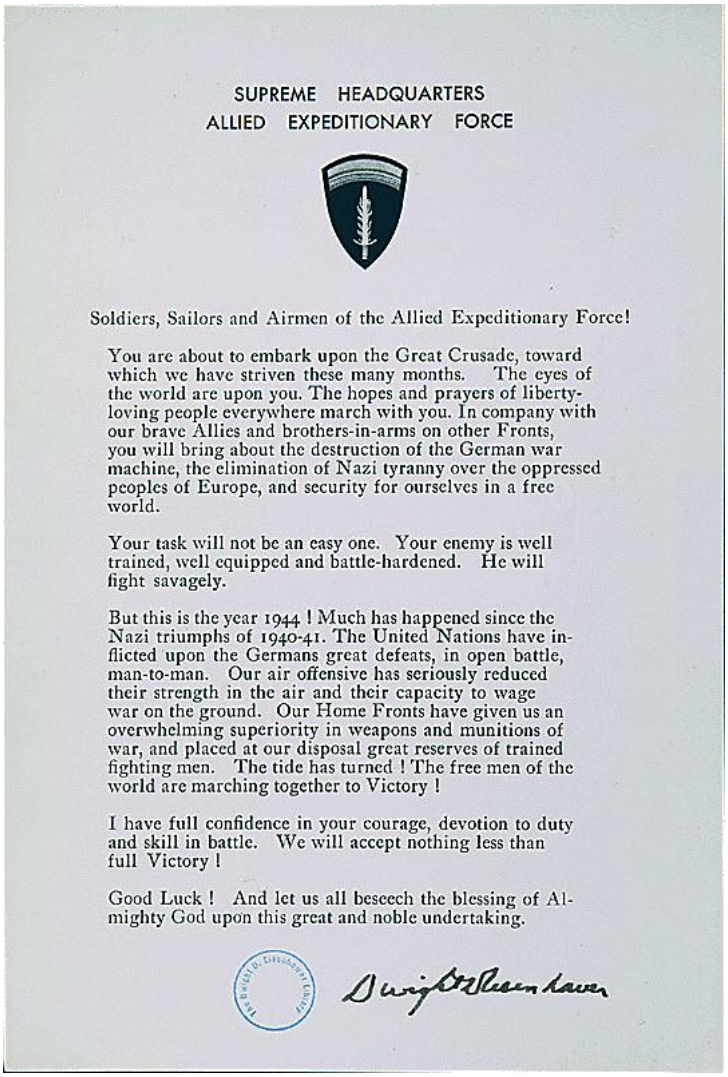
Expeditionary Force issued a letter to all the troops who participated in the Normandy invasion.



SUPREME HEADQUARTERS
ALLIED EXPEDITIONARY FORCE

Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Force!

You are about to embark upon the Great Crusade, toward which we have striven these many months. The eyes of the world are upon you. The hopes and prayers of liberty-loving people everywhere march with you. In company with our brave Allies and brothers-in-arms on other Fronts, you will bring about the destruction of the German war machine, the elimination of Nazi tyranny over the oppressed peoples of Europe, and security for ourselves in a free world.

Your task will not be an easy one. Your enemy is well trained, well equipped and battle-hardened. He will fight savagely.

But this is the year 1944 ! Much has happened since the Nazi triumphs of 1940-41. The United Nations have inflicted upon the Germans great defeats, in open battle, man-to-man. Our air offensive has seriously reduced their strength in the air and their capacity to wage war on the ground. Our Home Fronts have given us an overwhelming superiority in weapons and munitions of war, and placed at our disposal great reserves of trained fighting men. The tide has turned ! The free men of the world are marching together to Victory !

I have full confidence in your courage, devotion to duty and skill in battle. We will accept nothing less than full Victory !

Good Luck ! And let us all beseech the blessing of Almighty God upon this great and noble undertaking.

Dwight D. Eisenhower

In the hours after the invasion began Winston Churchill came to the House of Commons to announce that:

"*..during the night and the early hours of this morning the first of the series of landings in force upon the European Continent has taken place….upon the coast of France. An immense armada of upwards of 4000 ships … (with) several thousand smaller craft, crossed the Channel. Massed airborne landings have been successfully effected behind the enemy lines, and landings on the beaches are proceeding at various points at the present time. The fire of the shore batteries has been largely quelled. The obstacles that were constructed in the sea have not*

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proved so difficult as was apprehended. The Anglo American Allies are sustained by about 11000 first line aircraft……. So far the Commanders who are engaged report that everything is proceeding according to plan. And what a plan! *This vast operation is undoubtedly the most complicated and difficult that has ever taken place. It involves tides, wind, waves, visibility, both from the air and sea standpoint, and the combined employment of land, air and sea forces in the highest degree of intimacy and in contact with conditions which could not and cannot be fully foreseen…. The battle that has now begun will grow constantly in scale and intensity for many weeks to come and I shall not speculate upon its course."*

Later in the day Churchill added to his statement that:

"…The outstanding feature has been the landings of the airborne troops, which were on a scale far larger than anything that has been seen so far in the world. These landings took place with extremely little loss and with great accuracy. Particular anxiety attached to them because the conditions of light prevailing in the very limited period of the dawn – just before dawn – the conditions of visibility made all the difference……A very great degree of risk had to be taken in respect of the weather."

References - Colyton Heritage Centre has a small file in its archives. There is also a book for sale of wartime reminiscences from local people entitled '*Colyton at War*' by Geoff Elliott price £8.99.

Additional information is available from the following online sources

file:///D:/D-Day%20-%20Normandy%20Invasion,%20Facts%20&%20Significance%20HISTORY.htm

file:///D:/D-Day%2080%20Remembrance%20Royal%20British%20Legion.htm

https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/the-10-things-you-need-to-know-about-d-day

https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/d-day-80

https://www.nam.ac.uk/explore/d-day

file:///D:/Records%20Relating%20to%20D-Day%20National%20Archives.htm

https://blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk/tag/d-day/

https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-48215675

https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1941-1945-war-leader/the-invasion-of-france/

https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/96/a4460096.shtml

https://www.devonlive.com/news/devon-news/devon-grandads-who-were-trained-2317663

https://www.staybehinds.com/patrol/colyton-patrol

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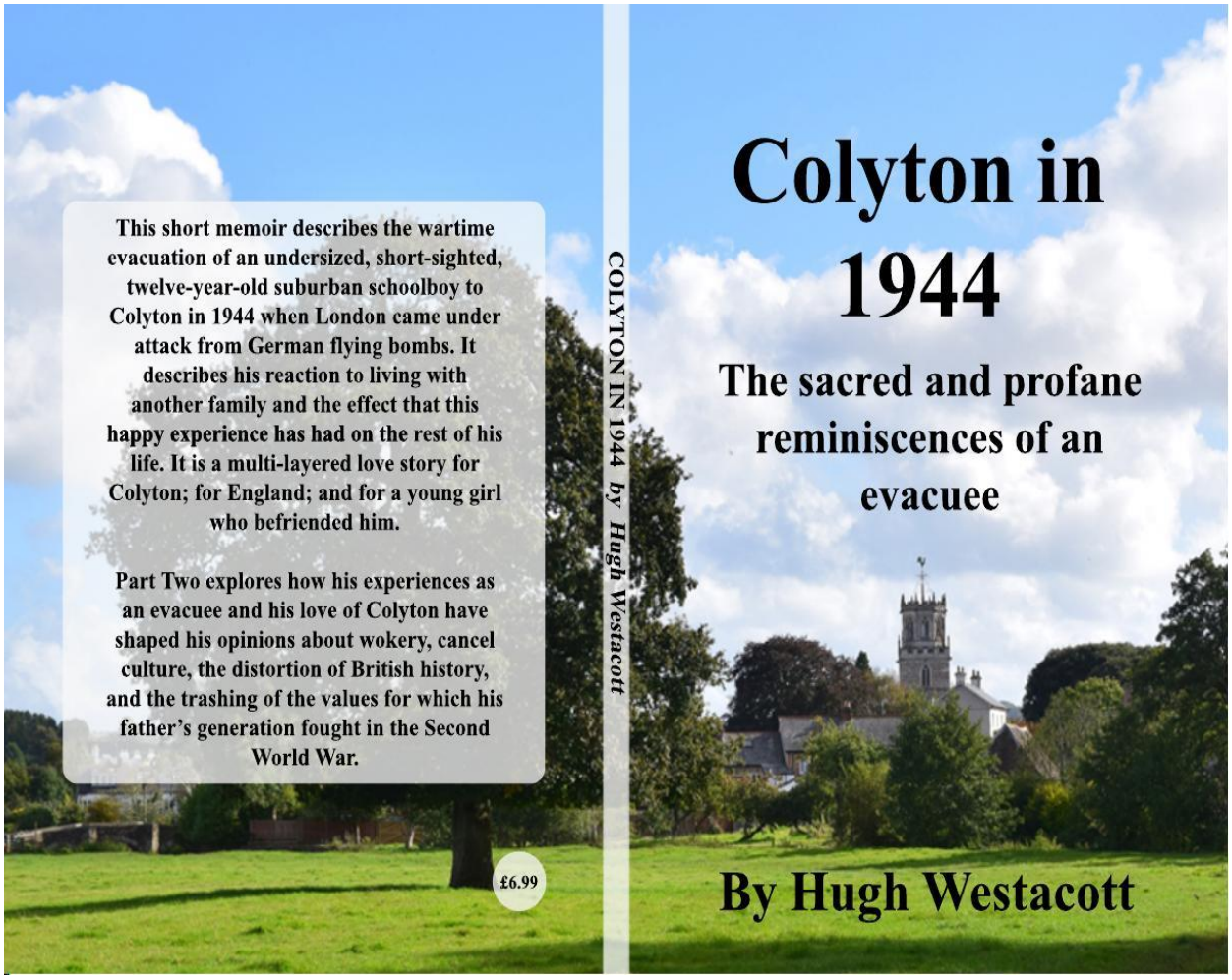
b. Meet the author: *Colyton in 1944*

80 years ago Hugh Westacott, then a twelve year old schoolboy, was evacuated to Colyton to escape the German flying bombs in London. He has written a personal reminiscence of his experiences then and how he has grown to love Colyton.



Do come and meet Hugh Westacott who will be in the Heritage Centre on **Wednesday 5 June from 1pm – 3 pm** to mark the publication of his book "*Colyton in 1944*." The book is available for sale in the Heritage Centre price £6.99.

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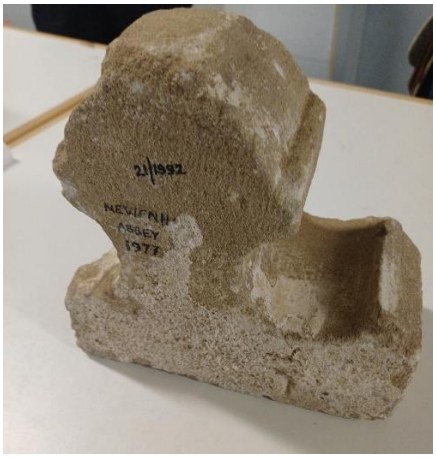
c. Newenham Abbey Tiles – part 2 – by Sarah Charman

Those of you who read last month's article on the history of Newenham Abbey will know I was keen to see the tiles found during the archaeological survey done over forty years ago – so on Thursday 18 April at the kind invitation of Tom Cadbury from RAMM I visited their store to see the tiles. Lisle Burrough, the farmer on whose land Newenham once stood, David Knapman from Axminster Heritage Centre and Jacquie McCullogh came too - with David kindly driving us all there. Tom came to the gate to welcome us and let us in.

Inside the building we first had to sign in and were then given rubber gloves to wear so we could touch the items. Several deep cardboard boxes were set out on a table in an anonymous looking corridor. We all crowded round the table expectantly as Tom opened the first box. The first item to emerge from the tissue paper was a piece of dressed stone work.



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Then we moved on to another box and the next items Tom unwrapped from the crinkly tissue paper were small fragments of tile and then a corroded piece of metal, which had possibly been a window latch.

As we moved down the line of cardboard boxes the tile fragments got bigger with distinctive medieval designs and crests on them.

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Finally, Tom walked round the end of the table and the last box he opened contained examples of Roman remains which were also found on the site of Newenham Abbey during the archaeological survey in 1977-1980. These of course raise another whole set of interesting questions!

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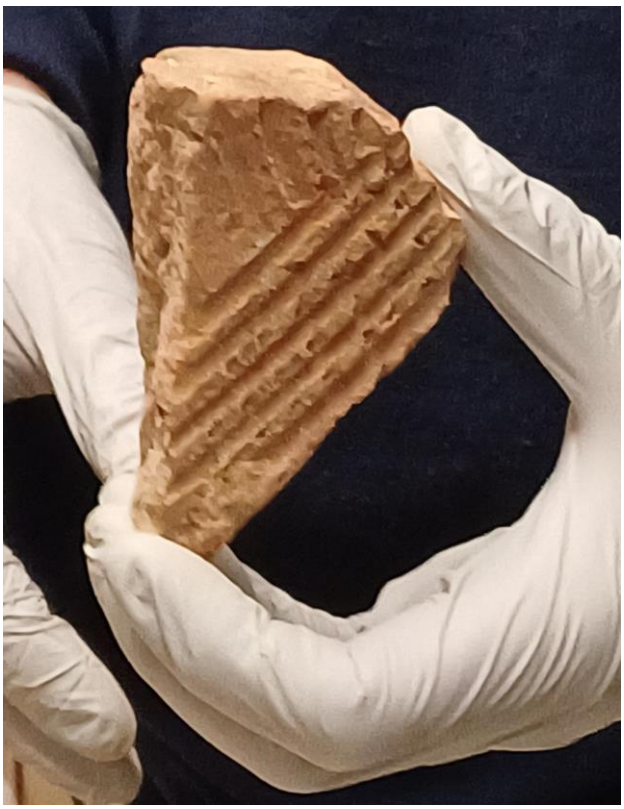

Follow up – I am now seeking permission from RAMM to have some of the tiles on loan for an exhibition here at the Heritage Centre in Colyton in April 2025. Watch this space….!

2. Other CPHS Matters

a. Heritage Centre visitors in April

Since opening at Easter we have had a very encouraging 209 visitors to the Heritage Centre.

b. Day Trip to Acton Court – 19 June 2024

There is still time to book a seat on our exciting day trip to Acton Court. Do drop into the Heritage Centre and find our more.

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Colyton Parish History Society

Acton Court 1535

Day trip to Acton Court
Wednesday 19 June 2024

Acton Court is one of the most important Tudor buildings in England, situated just outside Thornbury, near Bristol. A tour of the magnificent East Wing with lavish state apartments built for Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn while on their Summer progress of the West Country in 1535. Plus a tour of the gardens – a walled wild flower meadow and orchard, Old English and wild roses. An organic kitchen garden created on medieval lines which also produces vegetables, culinary and medicinal herbs. The remaining 12 acres supports wild meadows with rare native grasses, typical of those of the Tudor era.

Cost £27.50 per person to include house and garden tours
Departing 9.30am from Colyton

A lunch/refreshment stop at Iron Acton Garden Centre before arriving at Acton Court for the tour.

Sign up sheet in Colyton Heritage Centre / or contact us through colytonheritagecentre.org for more information.
Numbers limited to 30.

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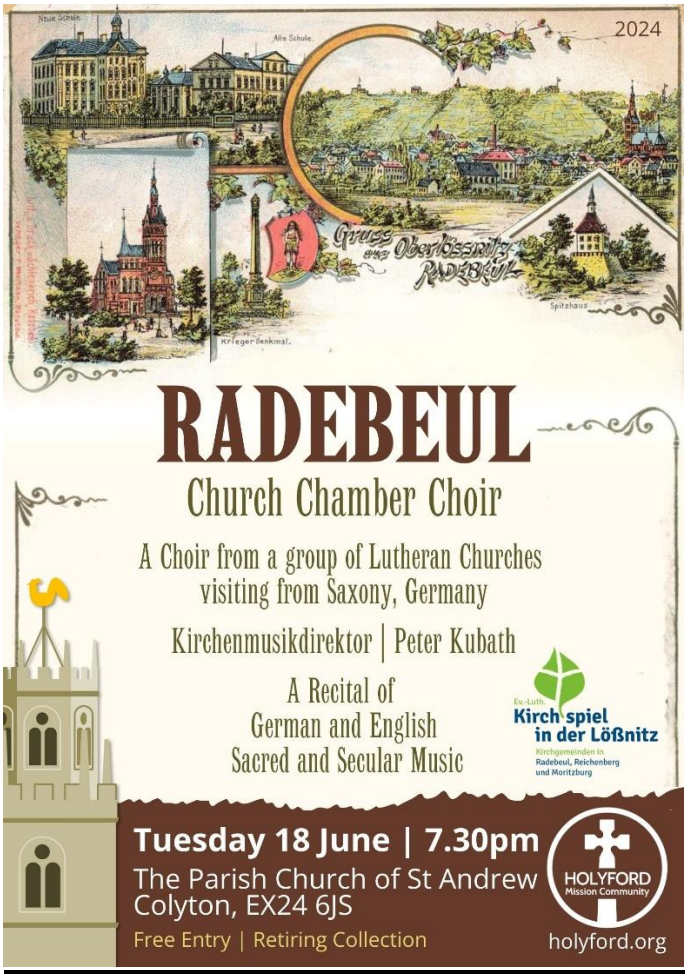
3. Other organisations events

a. St Andrew's Church



b. National Archives

i. Behind the Wire

. https://blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk/behind-the-wire/?utm_source=e-shot&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Campaign+2024_05_09_1

ii. Coronations

https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/coronations/?utm_source=e-shot&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Campaign+2024_05_09_1

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4. Items you may have missed

Stolen Mary Anning book returned to Lyme Regis
https://www.midweekherald.co.uk/news/24337096.lyme-regis-mary-annings-stolen-book-returned-lyme-regis/?ref=eb&nid=2397&block=article_block_a&u=26e309a1465491fa9108b8530c3bc91f&date=220524

Significant bronze age burial find on Dartmoor
https://www.midweekherald.co.uk/news/24320942.dartmoor-bronze-age-burial-chamber-may-significant-find/?ref=eb&nid=2397&block=article_block_a&u=26e309a1465491fa9108b8530c3bc91f&date=150524

Rare 50p coin sale
https://www.sidmouthherald.co.uk/news/24274694.royal-mint-rarest-coins-50p-sells-2-500-ebay/?ref=eb&nid=2405&block=article_block_a&u=26e309a1465491fa9108b8530c3bc91f&date=240424

Jurassic Coast exhibition
https://www.midweekherald.co.uk/news/24311808.lyme-regis-jurassic-coast-exhibition-drawn-water/?ref=eb&nid=2397&block=article_block_a&u=26e309a1465491fa9108b8530c3bc91f&date=110524

D-Day 80 anniversary show at the Beehive
https://www.midweekherald.co.uk/news/24297212.special-d-day-80th-anniversary-show-beehive/?ref=eb&nid=2397&block=article_block_a&u=26e309a1465491fa9108b8530c3bc91f&date=040524

Manor Mill open to public for first time in 5 years
https://www.midweekherald.co.uk/news/24297328.manor-mill-open-public-first-time-five-years/?ref=eb&nid=2397&block=article_block_a&u=26e309a1465491fa9108b8530c3bc91f&date=040524

Q. **What does D-Day stand for? – Answer**: 'D' literally stands for 'Day' – so D-Day is the 'day of days'. In military terms it is the day on which an event/invasion/action begins. https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/the-10-things-you-need-to-know-about-d-day or https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/D-Day

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