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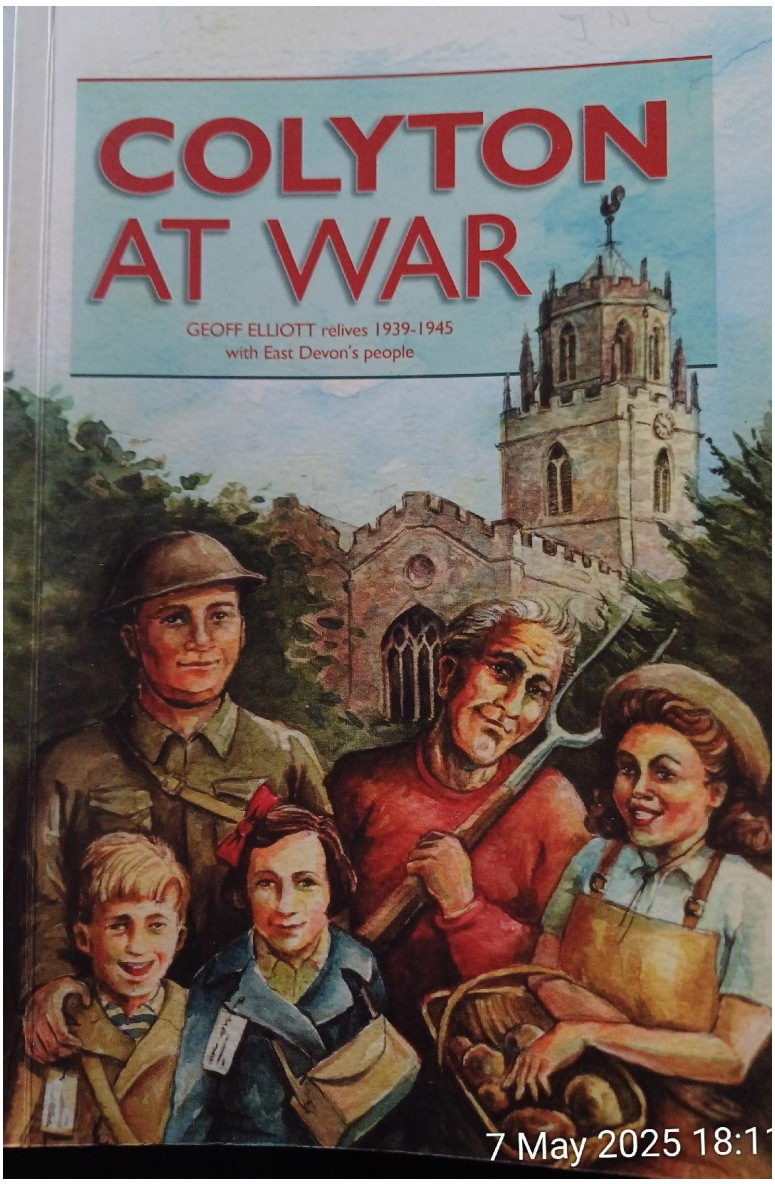
Colyton History Society Newsletter

8 May 2025

This month we are devoting the Newsletter to memories of VE Day 80 years ago here in Colyton and by way of comparison its impact on the city of Vienna in Austria.

1. News – VE Day 8 May 1945



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Adolf Hitler committed suicide in his bunker in Berlin on 30 April 1945 . At 2.41 am on 7 May, the Germans surrendered unconditionally to US General Dwight Eisenhower, Supreme Allied Commander Europe at the Allied HQ in Reims, France. The Soviets refused to accept this surrender document wanting the Germans to surrender directly to them to reflect their key role in defeating Nazi Germany. This was done the next day – so for Russians the war ended on 9 May.

Instructions were sent to troops in the field to cease fighting but to remain vigilant. The same day in Britain, the BBC interrupted its programme schedules to announce Victory in Europe Day would be the next day -8 May which would be a public holiday so people could celebrate.

The end of the war in Europe when it came on May 8 1945 produced mixed emotions. Relief, thanksgiving, remembrance and exhaustion were among the many complex emotions felt across Britain as well as a desire to celebrate the end of the war while recognising it was still going on in the Far East. Churchill spoke to the Nation on the wireless at 3pm.

Some of the memories of those who were here in Colyton at the time are included in Geoff Elliott's timely '*Colyton at War'* collection of personal accounts which is available to purchase in the Heritage Centre. (1)

Among them, Gerald Goddard, then a child, but who years later would go on to become manager of the bank in Colyton, recalled:

> *"When it was all over, Colyton celebrated as never before. In the square outside the Colcombe Castle, we had a tremendous bonfire. Like everyone else farmer Reg Virgin enjoyed the occasion. His great red face positively beamed. What he didn't know was how that fire was being kept alive.*
>
> *"We lads knew. for we were raiding faggots from his hayrick. Two at a time the faggots were carried across fields and thrown on the fire. By the end of the evening we had completely cleared the hay rick. How those faggots burned.*
>
> *"When Reg found out what we had done, he wasn't at all pleased. In fact, he was downright angry.*
>
> *"But years later, when I came back to work in Colyton, he was ready to laugh about it*." (1)

Local farmer David Hurford whose family has farmed in East Devon for over four hundred years recalled:

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"For a year the news grew steadily better. Then came the surrender. North-leigh's ancient church filled for the thanksgiving and 40 or 50 of the local men, who had been called upon to do little more than guard Honiton Tunnel at night, went back into Home Guard uniform for the victory parade.

"At last, all their drill practice paid off. They marched as they had never done before. the creases in their trousers as sharp as a pin."

And Sean Day Lewis who grew up in Colyton and would go on to become a nationally acclaimed journalist recalled rather acerbically:

"*At the end of the war we climbed the hill to light a beacon. Half the village turned out. For some reason, the man who was the elder of the Plymouth Brethren, a man called Oscar Gear, made what was supposed to be the triumphal speech. As the church bells rang loud and clear from Colyton, he whined on about how he had seen the light 40 years before and about his experiences as a member of his church. I don't remember him saying a word about the end of the war, which we were meant to be celebrating.*

"My brother and I made every effort to mark victory with flags and the like, but curiously my parents were not inclined to rejoice. They said war had been a terrible thing to have happened and that so many people had died. In a way they were right, but few others restrained their relief and joy."

Now just imagine for a moment what VE Day must have felt like for the inhabitants of Vienna in Austria. They were on the losing side. Soviet troops had finally taken the city from the Germans on 13 April 1945 after horrendous fighting. Much of the city was devastated by bombing. One in eight of the inhabitants was homeless and starving. Bodies lay unburied on the streets. What did the future hold for them? How should they think about themselves? Some saw the Red Army as liberators. Others saw the upheaval as a political or personal defeat and feared excessive violence.

In Vienna on the day the war ended a young secretary Adolfine Schumann (1916 – 2014) wrote:

"*8 May 1945, the day of peace! I see a troop of German prisoners escorted by Russians. From one day to the next heroes had become criminals. Everything we had previously believed in is trampled into the dirt. We are supposed to recognise that we too are to blame and cannot expect mercy. I take refuge in my diary only here I can say what I feel*."

For a young artist Arik Brauer (1929 – 2021) it was literally a matter of life or death:

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"*For me the collapse of the Nazi regime meant the difference between life and death. It was a moment of freedom for me. It was so overwhelming that anything else was no longer significant. Not even the hunger*."

I recently visited Vienna and spent a rainy morning perusing a remarkable exhibition *'Controlled Freedom'* at the Vienna Museum. This examines life in that city at the end of the Second World War where immediate steps were taken by all the Allies (initially the Russians) to re-establish cultural life there in the form of concerts and plays alongside reconstruction and restoring order.

The exhibition explained that the Allies determination to reintroduce culture to the city was to try and forestall support for the retention of national socialist beliefs (Nazism) and to promote a new self image in Austria independent of Germany. The Moscow Declaration of 1943 had paved the way for recognition of Austria as the 'first victim' of National Socialism without recognising the country's own complicity in the crimes.

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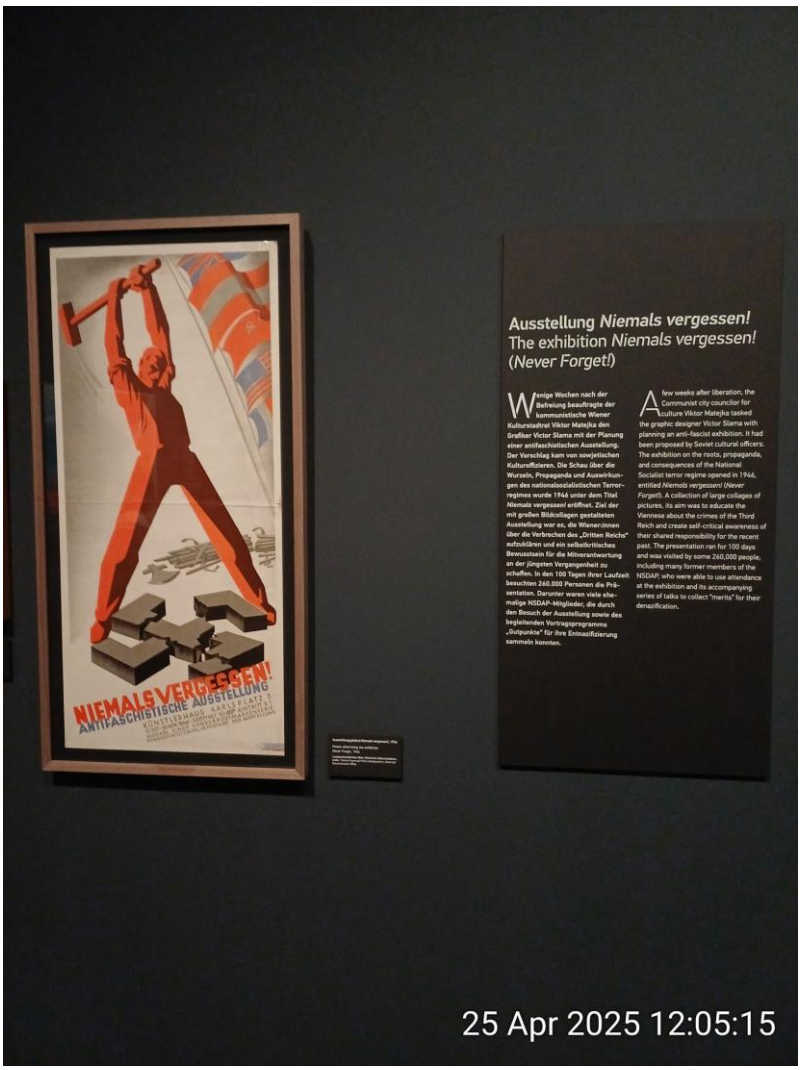

The 'first victim' myth became an essential element of national identity in the Second Republic. Nearly fifty years was to pass before Austria made an official break with the victim myth. In 1991 the Federal Chancellor, Franz Vranitsky acknowledged in the National Council "the shared responsibility for the suffering inflicted upon other nations and peoples not by Austria as a State, but certainly by citizens of this country."

By the millennium Austria had established a compensation fund for the victims of Nazism, appointed an historians commission to reevaluate the Austrian Nazi era and passed a law mandating the restitution of looted art.

The War and its aftermath had a prolonged and profound affect on everyone involved. As has been said before, in this increasingly unstable world *we* must learn the lessons of history or risk repeating them.

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References

1. ***Colyton at War***, Geoff Elliott, published by Colyton Parish History Society 2007
2. Letters between spies reveal end of Second World War
3. *https://www.msn.com/en-gb/news/uknews/the-road-to-v-e-day-from-the-assault-on-berlin-to-bonfires-and-dancing-in-the-capitals-of-europe/ar-AA1EeqiQ?ocid=msedgntp&pc=U531&cvid=cbd30ece28a043109c9cf707 https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/what-you-need-to-know-about-ve-day4925d0f5&ei=17*
4. *https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/what-you-need-to-know-about-ve-day*
5. VE Day 1945: Richard Dimbleby at Whitehall
6. https://www.bbc.co.uk/videos/c3g03z8e3m4o
7. - BBC report on VE Day from Ennsdorf in Austria, 100 miles west of Vienna https://www.bbc.co.uk/videos/c90zzve2vkwo
8. VE Mail - The Together Coalition
9. Victory In Europe Day - VE Day WW2 | Royal British legion https://www.historyhit.com/when-was-ve-day-and-what-was-it-like-to-celebrate-it-in-britain/
10. BEHIND THE IMAGE: VE Day, 8 May 1945 | Military History Matters
11. Beyond VE Day: The Events of Summer 1945 | Imperial War Museums
12. BBC - WW2 People's War - BBC Radio Devon
13. `BBC - WW2 People's War - Plane Crash at Colyton: Parachutist Lands at Farway
14. Incredible pictures show how Devon celebrated VE Day in 1945 - Devon Live
15. Derek Stevens 11/10 » History & Community - Marshwood Vale Magazine
16. VE Day, 8 May 1945 - The National Archives
17. VE Day broadcasts
18. VE Day: Last Nazi message intercepted by Bletchley Park revealed - BBC News
19. VE Day: What is it, when is it and why do we remember? - CBBC Newsround
20. How and Why Should We Celebrate VE Day? | Historic England
21. HistoryExtra - Advertisement: How did Bletchley Park's war end?... | Facebook

2. History Society News

a. **VE Day 80** – Does anyone have any family memories of VE Day or VJ Day - such as photos or diary accounts - which they would like to share? If so, please let me know and we will feature them in a later Newsletter. Sarah.charman@yahoo.co.uk

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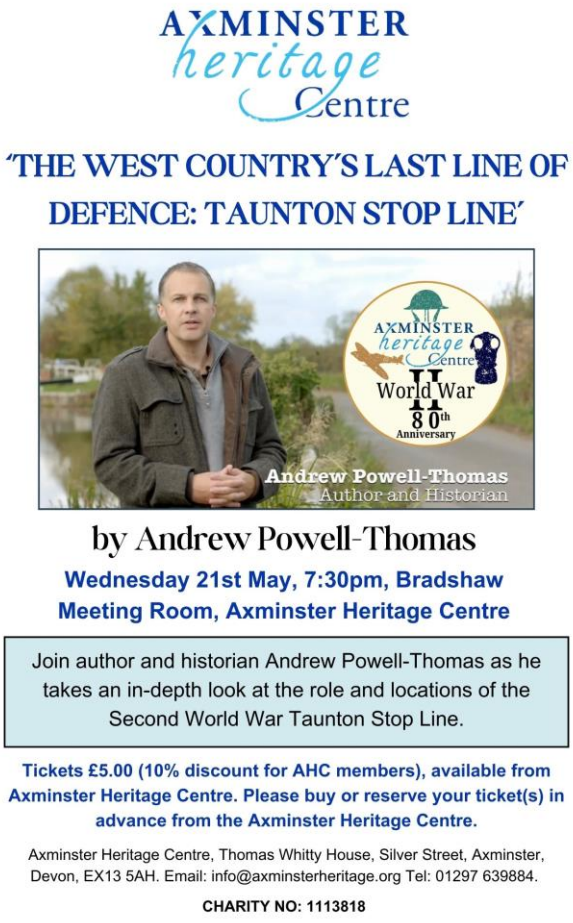
b. **History Society talks 2025** - The autumn session of History Society talks will begin on Tuesday **September 23rd at 2.30 pm with Jane Austen in Devon** by Hazel Jones from the Jane Austen Society.

c. **Colyton Town walks -** There are guided Town History walks on **Thursdays** throughout the summer, meeting in Dolphin Street carpark at 2.0pm, regardless of the weather. No booking required. £5.00 per person. .

3. Other organisations news and events



Axminster to host VE Day 80th anniversary celebrations | Midweek Herald

New exhibition opening at Axminster Heritage Centre | Midweek Herald

HistoryExtra - Advertisement: How did Bletchley Park's war end?... | Facebook

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b. East Devon National Landscape - Nature Events for 2025

🌙 **Bats and Bluebells at Blackbury Camp**
Join the team for an atmospheric evening learning all about bats as they swoop through the dusk skies
16th May, starts 9pm.

🌃 **Bats about Bats in Uplyme**
Another chance to meet these amazing night-flyers with local experts as we walk the river Lim.
13th June, starts 9.15pm

🌙 **Bats about Bats in Newton Poppleford**
This time we walk along the river Otter with local experts.
11th July, starts 9.15pm

🌊 **Rock Stars – Rockpooling at Seaton Hole**
Hands-on rockpooling session to discover the amazing sea creatures hiding between the tides. Perfect for families.
27th July, starts 2pm.

🦋 **All a Flutter Butterfly Walk at Aylesbeare Common RSPB Nature Reserve**
Take a gentle afternoon stroll and admire the beauty of the butterflies on the heathland.
1st August, starts 2pm

🌙 **Bats about Bats at Bolshayne Farm, near Colyton.**
Enjoy the tranquil setting of the farm to search for bats this time.
8th August, starts 8.30pm

💦 **The Big Dip – Family Streams Dipping at Manor Farm, Branscombe**

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Perfect for families – get hands-on and discover the secret life of streams and the creatures that call them home.
17th August, starts 2pm or 3pm

View more details and book your place via Eventbrite.
For any further information, please contact Ruth Worsley. Email: savingspecialspecies@gmail.com or call Ruth on 07765126565

4. Items you may have missed

a. English Heritage closes Okehampton Castle to daily visits until further notice *Famous Devon castle closed to visitors until further notice - Devon Live*

b. Rowan Williams praises Bijan Omrani's book as 'superb' - *https://www.midweekherald.co.uk/news/25119797.rowan-williams-east-devons-bijan-omranis-book-superb/?ref=eb&nid=2397&block=article_block_a&u=26e309a1465491fa9108b8530c3bc91f&date=290425*

c. Colyton – the Devon town with a rich historic past - *Colyton: the Devon town with a rich historic past | Midweek Herald*

d. Day trips to East Devon's market towns and countryside – things to see Day trips to east Devon's market towns and countryside | Sidmouth Herald

e. Sidmouth Museum reopens - *Sidmouth Museum reopens after extensive renovations | Sidmouth Herald*

f. Artists turn estuaries into stunning masterpieces - *Artists brave mud and geese to turn estuaries into stunning masterpieces - Devon Live*

g. OPINION: Coleberd and the paper bag and printers business | Sidmouth Herald

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