

WELCOME TO H.M.S MASTODON

Exbury House, which has been the home of the de Rothschild family since 1919, was requisitioned by the Admiralty in 1942 and became one of a number of 'Stone Frigates', land based command centres for the co-ordination of Combined Operations between the Navy, Army and Airforces of the Allies in their fight against Nazi Germany.

As H.M.S. Mastodon, (though she was also called H.M.S. King Alfred and H.M.S. Hawke at different times, and 'she', for all ships are traditionally called she), was responsible for the administration of the victualling, arming and training of the crews of many of the types of landing craft that were used in the amphibious assaults against occupied Europe.

Mastodon was not of primary importance for the strategic planning of D-Day, being subordinate to H.M.S. Vectis on the Isle of Wight. Rather it was a cog in the great scheme of things, but, as any watchmaker knows, without just one cog the watch will not work.

For example, in 1944 the following list of craft, that comprised assault force 'G', were administered from Mastodon:

MOORED IN THE BEAULIEU RIVER AND SERVICED DIRECTLY.

6 X LANDING CRAFT GUN LARGE: LCG(L)

Armed with 2 x 4.7" naval guns & 3 x 20mm dual purpose Oerlikons. 3 officers and 48 ratings and marines.

7 X LANDING CRAFT FLAK: LCT(F)

Armed with 8 x 2-pdr pom-pom & 4 x 20mm Oerlikons.

4 officers, 10 ratings and 48 marines.

8 X LANDING CRAFT TANK ROCKET: LCT(R)

Armed with 1,080 or 936 Rocket projectiles & 2 x 20mm Oerlikons. (Firing 17 tons of high explosive with one re-load.) 2 officers and 15 ratings.

16 X LANDING CRAFT TANK ARMOURED: LCT(A)

Armed with 2 X Centaur Tanks with 95mm guns mounted on platforms, 1 x Sherman Tank unmounted, all tanks being able to be beached for use ashore. The LCT(A) was a specially adapted LCT Mk 5. 2 x officers, 11 ratings + Royal Marines Armoured Support Group tank crews.

OFF LEPE AND STANSWOOD BAY.

LANDING CRAFT TANK MKs III,IV, V,: LCTs.

Numerous of these craft loaded troops, tanks and vehicles from the Tank Hards at Lepe and round the corner from Stanswood Point.

EVERYWHERE.

LANDING CRAFT VEHICLE PERSONNEL: LCVP

LANDING CRAFT PERSONNEL SMALL: LCP(S)

Numerous of these were in use on the River.

Headquarters and Flag Ship: H.M.S. BULOLO

Commodore C.E. Douglas-Pennant, with Major-General D.A.H. Graham (Canadian)

FAMOUS VISITORS.

Operation 'Overlord', the code name given for the liberation of Europe, was conceived and planned at the highest level by the Joint Chiefs of Staff at S.H.A.E.F., a body of field marshals, admirals and air chief marshals with General Eisenhower as the overall commander. Their headquarters were elsewhere.

Many of these admirals and generals visited Exbury as part of their morale boosting exercises. Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay, C-in-C of all the Naval operations, inspected the Commandos on Daffodil Meadow. The King, George VI, started his revue of the Allied naval forces from Mastodon. Setting out from Gilbury Pier to inspect the assembled fleet.

THE VISIT OF THE KING Code Name: AEROLITE.

This was the codename given to the visit on May 24th 1944 when King George VI came to review the assembled invasion fleet.

He was to arrive at H.M.S. Mastodon at 9.30 a.m. where Captain Swinley and the ship's company would provide the guard of honour. He would then proceed to Gilbury and board the Royal Barge.

This gave rise to great excitement amongst the Wrens, however the Captain confined them to the upstairs rooms of the House, only allowing the male ratings to be inspected on the lawn in front of the House. Others remember that some of the WRENS were allowed to stand in the Ha-ha, so only a line of hats were visible for inspection.

Being May, of course the Gardens were in full flower, so Swinley spent days learning all about the various flowers in anticipation of having to show the Monarch around. The King, however, had other ideas, having been a regular visitor to Exbury prior to the War. "No" he told Swinley politely, he knew his own way round and would relish a few moments of tranquillity before having to review his fleet.

Down at the Gilbury jetty there was much excitement amongst the boats crews, one crew, expecting to be inspected, found that their feet had been glued to the decks by sticky tar. Luckily the King had spent longer than the 15 minutes allotted him in the Gardens and they were saved the embarrassment of not being able to come smartly to attention.

He boarded the C.I.C. Portsmouth's barge, known as 'The Green Parrot' and slowly and quietly went down the Beaulieu River. All the C.O.'s saluted in turn. It was a very quiet and sombre occasion.

In the Solent he transferred to a high speed Motor Launch and with his party of Admirals sped off. The return to the barge presented the King with a moment of humour. Their craft approached at high speed, creating quite a wave. The poor WREN on the bow of the barge had enormous difficulty in maintaining her dignity and not falling into the sea. The King and the Admirals watched this balancing act with much mirth, commenting to the effect that WRENS look better in skirts.

WRENS

An admiral, who shall be nameless, was once heard to say "I like my WRENS to wear silk stockings, they do like it and so do my men".

The members of Women's Royal Naval Service were generally known as WRENS or 'Jennies'. Every naval establishment had them, they worked long and hard, at tasks as diverse as secretarial work, servicing guns, manning liberty boats and all the various functions back on shore that made a ship work, in fact by the end of the War there were 114 recognised categories for the jobs they did.

No man should ever forget that women played as important a role as they did in winning the War. For every woman who joined the Royal Navy another sailor could put to sea.

From listening to the recollections of many of those who served here, times spent at Exbury are generally remembered with much fondness. Romances often blossomed, as did the flowers each Spring.

There was, however, a generality of purpose, to defeat the Nazis, and work came before play; and as each mission was sent on its way, Dieppe, D-Day and Walcheren, those who were left behind could only pray for the safe return of their comrades.

THE MISSIONS.

DIEPPE

Mastodon's first real wartime role was in the co-ordination and assembly of the Tank Landing Craft for the gallant but ill-fated attempt by the Canadians to capture the port of Dieppe in August 1942. The Beaulieu

River provided ideal sheltered anchorage for the craft that would carry the new Churchill tanks, and H.M.S. Mastodon was the base that serviced them and provided for their administration.

The plan called for an all out assault on the harbour at Dieppe, codename 'Jubilee'. The naval force, the 'original' Force 'J' was under the command of Captain J. Hughes-Hallett. This was to be the first real trial by fire of Combined Operations, where all the services co-operated together to provide a co-ordinated attack. The naval force comprised numerous Landing Ships carrying LCAs and LCMs, Landing Craft Tank, Landing Craft Flak, Landing Craft Personnel, Admiralty Motor Launches, Motor Gun Boats, Motor Torpedo Boats, a couple of flotillas of mine sweepers and eight destroyers; 250 ships in all with around 3,000 naval crew were to be involved. These were to ferry 4,700 troops who would attempt to capture and hold the town.

First Lieutenant Peter Bull, first officer of LCT 303, recalled that he found, to his surprise, that he had to manoeuvre his 192 ft long craft down the River to the mooring trots opposite Lower Exbury. These craft would contain 5 tanks. He described his entry to the River as treacherous. After several 'minor' collisions, he managed to get his LCT into one of the empty spaces. On leaving he managed to wind a rope round one of his propellers and scraped the bottom constantly, but by 'some miracle' got clear and made it to Southampton. It was the last time he ever saw the Beaulieu River he recalled thankfully. (After that it was decided it was not suited for LCT 3's).

Unfortunately the attacking force lost the element of surprise and the Germans were waiting for them. Force J was badly mauled. The losses were tremendous.

However the lessons of this failure were learnt. Hughes-Hallett concluded that if it was not going to be possible to capture one of the Channel Ports then the solution must be to build one's own and float it across to France. Thus the idea of constructing the floating 'Mulberry' Harbours was born.

As far as Mastodon was concerned, it was also decided to retain a permanent naval assault landing force in the Solent.

MULBERRY HARBOURS

From the experience of Dieppe the Allies knew that in order to make a successful landing in France, not only should the invading forces land at points where the least opposition might be expected but also that safe harbours be set up to handle the rapid landing of men and material. The strategy was set at the Allied conference in Quebec in 1943. Firstly the Germans had to be deceived as to the Allies intentions. To this end Operation 'Fortitude' was set up to make them believe that the invasion would take place at the Pas de Calais.

Churchill wrote in a minute on the plan, codename 'Mulberry', how to achieve the second objective, a secure landing without capturing a port: "*Piers for use on beaches. they must float up and down with the tide. The anchor problem must be mastered- let me have the best solution worked out. Don't argue the matter. The difficulties will argue for themselves.*"

In the space of one year, two harbours, each the size of Dover, (which had taken seven years to construct), had to be built, towed to France and assembled, be defended from attack from air or sea, in as short a time as possible. It would be one of the largest feats of engineering ever attempted to date. The 'Mulberry' harbours were constructed in shipyards and on beaches throughout the United Kingdom.

240 contractors employed up to 20,000 men, of which 10,500 were labourers, 1,000 scaffolders, 5,000 carpenters and 770 steel fixers. The War Office produced some 130,000 drawings to enable the construction of these triumphs of British engineering. In all 545,000 cubic yards of reinforced concrete; 66,000 tons of reinforcing steel; 9,000 standards of timber; 440,000 square yards of plywood; and 97 miles of steel wire rope were used.

Bailey's Hard, Exbury and Lepe played their part. The old oyster beds above Gin's Farm were used for the construction of a concrete floating dock that could raise 400 tons. The beach at Stanswood Bay, which is the extension of Lepe Beach, was used for the manufacture parts of the breakwaters. 700 Irish navvies worked there and lived in camps close by.

85 tugs towed the sections over the Channel to Normandy, but disaster struck on D-Day+13 when one of the worst gales in 40 years struck. The American's harbour at St. Laurent was wrecked, but luckily by then they had captured Cherbourg. The British continued to use their harbour right into 1945.

P.L.U.T.O.

Another one of the lessons learnt prior to D-Day was just how vulnerable fuel supplies were to air and sea attack. The victory over Rommel in the desert had, in part, been achieved by locating and sinking his tanker fleet, thus denying him adequate fuel. How could the Allies avoid a similar fate, and prevent the still dangerous Kriegsmarine or the Luftwaffe wiping out surface shipping?

The answer was to create P.L.U.T.O. - Pipe Line Under The Ocean, a 200 mile long fuel pipe that would carry the much needed petrol out of harms way on the sea bed. The pipe as made from 3" diameter flexible welded steel. This was mounted onto huge floating drums known as H.M.S. Conundrums, each of which carried 70 miles of pipe.

The pipe lines ran from the AGWI refinery down to Lepe Beach, then across the Solent to the Isle of Wight. From there they were pulled across the Channel, in broad daylight, at a snails pace by deep sea tugs. In all 770 miles of pipe were laid which supplied 172,000,000 gallons of fuel to the Allied armies.

Churchill characteristically summed it up: "*Operation P.L.U.T.O. was a remarkable feat of British engineering, distinguished in its originality, pursued with tenacity and crowned by complete success*".

THE D-DAY LANDINGS.

The first ashore, after the massive bombardment by the Naval guns, which had effectively kept the enemy's head down, were the A.V.R.E., Armoured Vehicles Royal Engineers, their flail-mounting tanks clearing a path through the obstacles. Then came the first wave of infantry, who were shot at by artillery, machine guns, mortars and rifles. As the attack progressed so the successive waves had to dodge burnt out vehicles, bodies, barbed wire and yet more mines.

Amongst the earlier to land were the men from Royal Naval Commando 'P', who had been billeted in the grounds of Mastodon and embarked, complete with all their equipment from Hythe. After many hours at sea, cold, wet, uncomfortable, often sea sick, their landing craft still had to dodge spikes hung with explosives and iron hedgehogs covered with mines or old shells.

Once ashore, they set up the Command Posts for the Beach Control and Beach Signal units that would co-ordinate the wave after wave of Assault vessels that would have to force their way through the obstacles, by then including many wrecked craft, to disgorge more troops and tanks, trucks and ammunition, and establish the Beach Head.

WALCHEREN

After the excitement of D-Day had abated and what remained of the LCT's returned to their berths, H.M.S. Mastodon had one more mission to organise for its motley array of craft. This was the attack on Walcheren Island in Holland.

It was decided in September '44 that a three phase operation be mounted around the beginning of November to capture Walcheren Island. The island commanded the sea route to Antwerp and was heavily defended. Large areas of low lying land had been flooded by Allied aerial bombardment. The plan called for a seaborne assault landing by the 4th Special Service Brigade, the commandos, and it would be part of Mastodon's job to provide the landing craft. Captain A.F. Pugsley, who was quartered at Lepe House, commanded Naval Force 'T' ready for the assault on Westkapelle. This force had 150 craft of all kinds, along with rocket and gun ships and several heavy warships.

The beaches were heavily defended with artillery, and tactical air power was unavailable due to adverse weather conditions, but Pugsley and Brigadier Leicester decided that the assault should proceed anyway as other landings were already in progress further up the coast. The German defenders put up a strong fight though they were eventually overwhelmed, but not before the assault force were severely battered. Almost all the landing craft were hit by enemy fire, out the 27 vessels used by the Marines only 7 remained capable of further action.

LEPE HOUSE.

Lepe House was where the redoubtable Captain A.F. Pugsley D.S.O. RN. installed himself during the run up to D-Day. He was the commander of Naval force subgroup 'J1'. There he had a small staff including one

Petty Officer Cook, a Mrs Byrne, who had served in the WRNS in World War I. She had children at boarding school and a husband who was a serving Brigadier. Whenever the Captain was away at sea Mrs. B would be away too, her absences causing much consternation amongst the rest of the staff who had become most accustomed to her cooking.

Pugsley was a popular officer, he was especially liked by the flotsam recovery teams off the Normandy Beaches for his rewards of Mars Bars to the crews who on 'scavenging days' picked up the most wreckage and flotsam.

Early on the morning of the 8th June 1944 he was aboard H.M.S. Lawford off Normandy when it was attacked by aircraft and sunk. This was the third ship he had lost, this time though, as he swam to safety he felt reassured that he had taken the precaution of giving much of his spare gear to Captain Swinley at Mastodon.

THE BEAULIEU RIVER.

The sheltered nature of River lent itself to use by all manner of small craft, being sheltered from the waves of the open sea and easily accessible along most of its length.

Motor Torpedo Boats and other high speed craft, often built locally on Southampton Water and fitted out at Bucklers Hard, would speed in and out on secretive missions, surveying the defences on the Atlantic Wall or taking the Commandos on clandestine raids to occupied France.

INCHMERY AND S.O.E

Situated next to Lepe House at the mouth of the River, Inchmery House, also owned by the Family, was home to many Commando raiding parties, Jedburghs and members of S.O.E. (Special Operations Executive) who regularly went to various parts of Europe.

These were elitist private armies that carried out 'butcher and bolt' raids on the coast of occupied France. Their weapons were the knife and the silenced pistol, their aim to kidnap unsuspecting Germans for interrogation and to instil terror into the occupation forces.

Other units were sent to sample and survey the beaches and identify suitable landing spots for the future invasion of Europe.

The primary tasks of S.O.E., however, were to set up networks of Resistance, to get intelligence information back to the UK and co-ordinate sabotage activities against the Germans.

Inchmery was occupied from February '41 until early '42 by the Free French, and General de Gaulle visited on several occasions. Thereafter, from May '42, 62 Commando 'D' Troop, a cover name for the Small Scale Raiding Force (SSRF) used it as their training and operations base.

Some fourteen houses in the area were also requisitioned for use by S.O.E., controlled from Beaulieu, to train their agents for the clandestine lifestyle they would have to adopt once they were dropped into occupied Europe.

One of those to be trained at Inchmery was George Lane.

George was captured while surveying the coastal defences of the Atlantic Wall. He has the dubious honour of being probably the only Allied soldier to be given tea by Rommel who had expressed a wish to meet a real 'Commando'. Lane, who understood German perfectly, knew that there was much argument amongst the SS who felt that he should be executed on the spot, as Hitler had ordered all captured raiders to be shot. Rommel, not knowing that Lane was, in fact, a Hungarian Jew, was impressed by Lane's demeanour and had him sent to a normal prisoner-of-war camp instead.

He was also the husband of the Hon. Miriam Rothschild, Lord Rothschild's daughter.

He wrote to Miriam at their home in Buckinghamshire saying how much he missed her and how he would like to see her. She wrote back immediately "I'll see you in church."

To his surprise there she was on Sunday. "How did you know where I was?" he asked.

"From the post mark" was her reply. Sure enough the letter was franked 'Exbury'. "It is, after all, the home of my cousins!"

THE de ROTHSCHILD FAMILY DURING THE WAR.

At the outset of the War Exbury House was lived in Lionel de Rothschild and his family. Life went onto a war footing and the main works of art were removed and put into safe storage. Edmund, Lionel's eldest son, went over to France with the B.E.F., his younger brother, Leo, was evacuated to Canada, to return in '43; his sisters, Rosemary and Naomi, joined the Red Cross. Naomi remembers her first job was to convert an old cattle lorry into an ambulance, spending hours scrubbing the old manure from its floor.

During the first air raid on Exbury, a number of high explosive bombs hit the Gardens. Lionel immediately saw the potential in the craters and put them to good use to create the Middle and Bottom Ponds.

Lionel, who had started building the Gardens in 1921, died on the 27th January 1942 after six months' illness. Before his death he had offered the House to the authorities as a home for evacuees from Southampton who might be rendered homeless should the port be bombed by the Germans.

The Admiralty had other ideas, so in May '42 Edmund was summoned from his Regiment in Scotland and made his way through blacked out Britain by rail. On arriving at Portsmouth he was asked by the Admiralty if he could clear the House in 48 hours and move his mother, Mrs. Lionel, into the old laundry, renamed Marise Cottage, in the village. This he accomplished using relays of staff and villagers. He then returned to his Regiment and went off to fight overseas, not returning to Exbury until 1946.

His brother, Leo, used to come down to Exbury during the school holidays from late '43-'45, with his mother, who otherwise worked with the St. John Ambulance in the East End of London.

He remembers being invited by Leading Seaman Sharpen on a boat ride to Portsmouth in Spring '44 and witnessing some of the goings on:

"...I accepted with alacrity. We set off, and shortly after leaving Gilbury passed a creek on the west bank of the Beaulieu River where 'Mulberry' was being constructed. Of course I had no idea what was going on under the towering group of cranes which was all one could see of the operation. We passed several craft that looked like large oblong coracles and which were used to ferry men from the various embarkation points to transports across the Channel.

Access to the shore was forbidden, even for local residents, and guards were posted along all the roads to the sea. So I was quite unprepared for the sight that greeted us as we pulled into the reach of the River running parallel to the Solent between Needs Ore and Lepe. It was amazing; every inch of the Solent was occupied by ships and boats of all sizes. No one said a word about this extraordinary sight. I suppose they knew what lay ahead, but we kept our ideas to ourselves"

The Family's domestic interests, and in particular, Edmund's fine wine cellar, were ably protected by Mr. Witts, the redoubtable butler. Frequent attempts were made to get at the wine. Two ingenious ratings, whose job it was to stoke the boilers, even tried to hack their way through the cellar walls. They were soon caught and sent to the goal at the bottom of the drive pending their dispatch back to Portsmouth.

Just prior to D-Day another attempt was made to get at the wine, this time by Captain Swinley, Mastodon's C.O., but Mr. Witts stood his ground. Swinley used every form of cajoling, saying that his men were going to face great dangers in the future, but Witts was adamant. Captain de Rothschild was at the front at this very moment doing just that, and he, Witts, must protect his master's interests. The matter was resolved by Witts ringing the special telephone number given to the Family in case of such 'emergencies'. An hour later a chastened Captain Swinley had to admit defeat. On no account was the wine cellar to be touched.

THE CAPTAIN

Many people remember Captain R.F.B.Swinley RN who took over as commander in February '44, (or 'Roland the Bad'-as one of his nick-names would have it). He was a most efficient base commander, an adroit seaman, a keen shooting man and very uncertain with the WRENS, one of whom commented: *'he behaved very circumspectly to the WRENS under his command, I don't think he really knew what to make of us. I quite liked him. To the men he was hard and heartily disliked.'*

DOGS.

A smallish terrier mongrel called 'Scruff' was the Official Camp Dog. By all accounts he was a remarkable fellow, of somewhat obscure origins but definitely trained by a poacher! Scruff could catch anything; rats, mice, rabbits, birds, snakes, stoats and even hedgehogs were fair game for him. His big pal was 'Spike' a spaniel type.

Captain Swinley's dog, Jeeves, a Great Dane, would give him a wide berth, the Captain was once heard to say "Come here, Jeeves. This little fellow is only half your size, and you'll probably get your nose bitten."

Jeeves, unlike Scruff, had an immaculate pedigree. When it was muddy his owner would put condoms on his paws to keep them dry. It was part of the Officer of the Day's responsibility to take it for walks.

Ultimately there were so many dogs attached to camp that the Captain had to decree that only four could remain on the roster.

One of these, an Alsatian, could only understand commands in German!

THE CHAPLAIN

The local vicar acted as the chaplain to H.M.S. Mastodon and became affectionately known as 'Old Fourbuns' due to his habit of arriving at the Wardroom promptly at 4.p.m. each day and demolishing not less than four currant buns on each visit.

CREAM, EGGS AND OTHER LITTLE LUXURIES.

The Transport Officer was most efficient; he had his WREN drivers well trained. On all journeys around the place he made sure they were to call at the local farms and acquire eggs, butter, cream and poultry.

PICKING FLOWERS WAS FORBIDDEN.

Even during the War the Head Gardener, Francis Hanger, would regularly show off prize blooms at the R.H.S.. One particular year, however, an able seaman removed a particular bloom that Hanger had been nurturing, to give to his paramour. He was not pleased and complained to the Captain. Result, everyone was confined to barracks for 48 hours until the sheepish culprit owned up.

THE BUTLER

Everyone tried to get on the good side of Mr. Witts, the erstwhile butler to Lionel, after all he had the keys to the library. The firm favourite as reading matter went was the unabridged 'Memoirs of Casanova'.

DRILL

The Colour Sergeant of the Royal Marines in charge of drilling the WRENs had his hands full! His 'squaddies' were not what he was used to, after all who ever heard of a Marine who had to run off to the shrubbery because their knicker elastic had broken!

NEVIL SHUTE

The novelist, whose full name and rank was Lieutenant Commander Nevil Shute Norway RNVR, an aeronautical engineer by training whose hobby was writing, was a regular visitor to Mastodon throughout the War. In Mastodon and its environs, especially the spit of land at Need's Ore, Norway found ideal sites for his wartime speciality, developing and testing unorthodox weaponry.

As Head of Engineering and Deputy to the Director of the Department of Miscellaneous Weapons (DMWD), an Admiralty unit set up in 1940 by Sir James Somerville, he set to work on numerous rocketry projects for use in anti-aircraft and anti-submarine warfare.

Needs Ore Point, overlooked by Mastodon, was chosen as the test site for ship-borne catapults that could launch rocket propelled pilotless aircraft for laying smoke screens around assault landing vessels. The catapult was mounted on an obsolete landing craft and the idea was to use a trolley to catapult aircraft down the one mile length running from the old Coast Guard Cottages to the Point near the mouth of the Beaulieu River.

There were numerous problems to sort out, and Norway fired off many blocks of concrete from his trolley as well as quite a few rocket driven aircraft. However this line of experimentation did not have any usable products by June 1944. Only later on did the research pay off in the development of guided missile systems.

His fame as a writer, though, was such that the Ministry of Information asked him to accompany the D-Day landings on the 6th of June.

Norway obviously enjoyed his time at Exbury, even joining the 'Pig Club'. As Nevil Shute, he transferred his feelings about Exbury and Mastodon into his 1955 novel, 'Requiem For A WREN'. This he wrote after he had emigrated to Australia, which he did in protest for not being able to keep his pig, to which he had become quite attached.

...That evening the two girls wandered around with mixed feelings, bemoaning the fate that had landed them in a place where nothing operational was going on and which was ten miles from the nearest movie. At the same time, they were forced to realise that the Navy had sent them to one of the most lovely country houses in England....

Nevil Shute was a frequent visitor to HMS Mastodon and recorded the events of April 18th. '...I came on an enigma of this curious war...' he wrote soon after. Whether he saw the actual crash is in doubt, but it is through his immortalisation of the event in his 1955 novel 'Requiem For A Wren' that the tale of Ju 188 Z6 EK continues to fascinate. He took various elements of the mystery bomber's final moments and wove them into a somewhat depressing tale of a young woman's suicide in Australia. The Slavonic sounding names of two of the crew, their landing gear coming down for their final touchdown, the firing of red Very lights, a sighting of what seemed to be white parachute silk held out of the cockpit were construed by him as signs of surrender.

Shute's heroine, Janet Prentice, was a Wren armourer whose job was to service Oerlikon guns, quick firing anti-aircraft weapons, on the landing vessels moored in the Beaulieu River. In the novel he describes the bomber's fate:

The Junkers was not more than a thousand feet up now and coming straight towards them, a beautiful copybook example of a sitting shot. She had it fixed below the centre of her sight exactly as she wanted it; she swung her body slowly, waiting for it, savouring the moment. It was impossible that she could miss; she felt too confident. She pressed the grip and opened fire, and the gun started beating rhythmically, and the smoke of cordite and burnt grease was all around her. She swung her body down slowly till she was crouching almost on her knees, holding it exactly as it should be in the sight.

As she fired the wheels came down; she knew something had happened but it meant nothing to her. She went on firing and the glass and Perspex nose of the cabin shattered, and three bright stars appeared inside the cabin quickly in succession. It reared up suddenly and passed right over the L.C.T.s in a steep climb towards Mastodon; she scrambled round with the gun to get it on a reverse bearing, but now her own ship blanked her fire. She swung her body to the side to look round the obstruction and saw it again. A Bofors from the shore opened up on it as it passed from the river marshes over land. It stalled with full power on and fell into a steep dive, and as it fell the Bofors blew its fin off. It plunged steeply into a field near the marshes and crashed with a great thud, and a whoof, and a towering pillar of flame, and a huge cloud of black smoke. Janet stood trembling in the harness of the Oerlikon, appalled at the sight.

Around her men were clamouring and shouting; she stood bewildered while they unfastened the back strap for her. It was incredible that this had happened because of what she did.....

..... "Four hits, sir," said the rating. "She hit it four times. I saw 'um. Eh, ba goom, I've never seen shooting to touch it."

THE AIR WAR.

Exbury was subjected to attack from the air from 1940 until 1944; it was flown over, bombed, photographed and even crashed on.

Some of the results of this activity are still with us today. Two of the ponds in the Gardens started out as bomb craters.

People still remember the night Coventry was attacked for the relentless stream of enemy aircraft that flew over from their bases in newly captured France.

Others have more tangible memories, such as the little girl, now of course much older, who, on her way home from school in Exbury, was strafed by a passing bomber.

THE BOMBS.

Throughout the War Exbury and the surrounding countryside, in common with the rest of the nation, were hit many times by German bombs and falling Ack-Ack shells. The map shows the known sites of some of those bits of ordnance that either exploded or were removed by the local bomb disposal experts.

The first Nazi planes came over on 7th June 1940. Their first overt action in the area was to drop leaflets on Marchwood exhorting the people of Britain to surrender to avoid unnecessary bloodshed! (A German spy was reputedly apprehended in the act of signalling to the incoming planes from Marchwood Church tower and summarily executed.) From then on the enemy regularly flew over the district, sometimes coming in at low level across the Isle of Wight.

In the early days some of the bombs had screamer whistles, made from either cardboard or old bayonet sheaths, attached to the fins which were designed to add to the terror caused. These were dropped all over the area on 30th August 1940 in raids that lasted some 6 hours prompting the laconic remark 'some night' in the local Civil Defence journal.

Apparently even the cows learnt what the air raid sirens meant and were seen to make off for the nearest trees when the warnings sounded.

Bombs of many different varieties were dropped, and it was the job of the Civil Defence to defuse those that failed to explode. Arthur Hosey was one of those responsible for identifying whether the device was an oil bomb, or an anti-personnel bomb or a magnetic mine or just a plain high explosive device.

Exbury received its first pasting on the night of 17th November '40, being hit by 13 high explosive bombs. 2 parachute mines on the 30th and 8 H.S's the following day.

The House and Gardens had a number of direct hits. The closest escape being had when a parachute mine landed by the back door. Luckily it failed to explode, and was removed by Navy personnel, then taken by low-loader to Beaulieu Heath where it was safely detonated.

Inchmery was straddled by incendiary devices. Hosey remembers that some failed to explode and on going there he recalls that someone, possibly a batman, in the house had removed one of the fuses. When asked where the fuse was the culprit removed the offending souvenir from his pocket. Hosey told him to take it back outside, informing the foolish person that it could easily have done its job and exploded in his hand.

Many incendiaries fell on Exbury during the night of 15th March. During this raid Emenopteris Henryii, one of the rarest trees in the Gardens took a direct hit that rendered it for ever more lopsided. The Gatewood area and the Arboretum were completely ablaze.

The magnetic mines used to come down on parachutes with ropes reputedly made from potato fibre. These dissolved on contact with sea water, leaving the mine ready to do its worst on passing shipping. One of these brutes landed by the deer fence close to where the Car Park is now. The magnet was tripped by the metal of the deer fence, causing a huge explosion that illuminated the night for miles around.

One of the few casualties in the area was Ern Renyard, a special constable, who died at Lime Kiln Lane during the first attack on the 17th Nov. Eyewitnesses reported that he was killed by shrapnel from an anti-personnel bomb that not only went through his head, but also left a clean 3" hole in the adjacent telegraph pole.

THE ANTI-AIRCRAFT BATTERIES.

The anti-aircraft defences were built up over a number of months. To begin with the Lepe Farm Ack-Ack battery consisted of one gun, which was in fact made out of wood! With this they hoped to fool the Nazi reconnaissance planes.

The other main battery was over at Lime Kiln Lane. Here, one of the guns received a direct hit from an Anti-Personnel bomb, destroying the gun and killing all 10 crew.

All the fields capable of being landed on by gliders had lines of posts sunk into them, making the area resemble a giant hedgehog.

With all the anti-aircraft guns in the area it was inevitable that some of the shells would return to earth or be fired at such a flat trajectory as to inflict the same sort of damage as the enemy. The closest escape from one of these was by a Holbury resident, over 90 years of age, who had a shell hit his bungalow, go through his bed head, passing no more than six inches above his head, on between his feet, and bury itself, without exploding, in the front porch of the house, leaving him shaken but unscathed.

An uncorroborated eyewitness report of strafing by the Nazis.

'6 year old Margaret Orman was returning from the school in Exbury to her home at Sturt Cottages. When she was about 100 yards from the house, a German bomber, possibly a Heinkel 111, flew over at tree top height, flames belching from the engines. The rear gunner opened fire on Margaret, luckily missing her. She thought the plane clipped the chimney from the cottage and crashed with a massive explosion in the field behind the house. The local taxi driver, Mr. Hart, came round the corner and took a shaken Margaret home.'

No other records exist of this incident. However, there were other verified reports of low level strafing of civilians in Holbury by the Nazis on the 21st August 1940. Also, a string of bombs were dropped on 26th May '42 at around 4 p.m., one of which landed on Sturt Lane, just behind the cottage.

This second attack provides the more likely explanation of the subsequent explosion- that the plane dropped one of its bomb close by, the blast making the chimney collapse or hitting it with the machine gun fire.

THE JUNKERS JU 188 E-1.

Even today, mystery surrounds the true circumstances of the flight of the Junkers Ju 188 E-1 that was shot down over Exbury on the morning of 17th April 1944, crashing on the Park in front of Exbury House. Was it on a photo-reconnaissance mission or had it simply lost its way?

The crew of 7 all died before these questions could be answered.

Who were the Germans:

Crew:

Unteroffizier Johann (Hans) Czipin, aged 21, Flugzeugführer- pilot. b.Grafenbach, Lower Austria. Had been an operational pilot since March '43.

Unteroffizier Johann Krause, aged 23, Beobachter- bomber's observer. b. Sternberg in Sudetenland. Saw first active service in May '41. Wounded in the Crete campaign of '42.

Unteroffizier Robert Schultes, aged 19, Bordfunker- radio operator. b. Vienna, Austria. Qualified as operator April '43.

Unteroffizier Eitel Wysotzki, aged 22, Bordshütze- air gunner. b. Seegutten, Johannisberg district in East Prussia.

Obergefreiter Hans Ehrhardt, aged 22, Bordshütze- air gunner. b. Ilmenau, E. Germany. Trained as a hairdresser, joined the Luftwaffe in '41. Not a regular member of the aircrew- happened to be standing in for a sick airman on 18th April.

Ground Crew:

Obergefreiter Leonhard Shwingenstein, aged 23, 1. Wart- Chief Ground Crew- (aircraft mechanic.) b. Augsburg, Germany. Studied at Aeronautical Engineering School at Thorn and joined the Luftwaffe in '43.

Gefreiter Edgar Vester, aged 20, Funkwart- radio technician. b. Dortmund, Germany. Trained as a bricklayer. Joined Luftwaffe in '42, wanted to become an Air Intelligence Officer.

What is known is that it flew over some of the preparations for the invasion and, had it escaped back to its base this massive build up of ships, material and the 'Mulberry' sections would have been reported directly to Hitler.

From this the German Intelligence services would, almost certainly, have deduced that Operation 'Fortitude', the phoney plan created by the Allies to persuade the Nazis that the invasion of France would be via the Pas de Calais, was in fact a deception. The outcome of the invasion could then have been seriously jeopardised and the Allies driven back into the sea. The history of Europe might well have been different had this plane not been brought down when it was.

Truth and fiction merge. What is known for sure, however, is that the plane was a Ju 188 E-1 which was an advanced photo-reconnaissance model and not a conventional bomber and that it was attached to 2 Staffel (squadron) of Kampfgeschwader (bomber group) 66.

At 7.10 a.m. red alert sounded in the area. It was a command imperative that this plane, which reportedly flew around the Solent for some time, be shot down. At 7.30 two Typhoons from 266 Squadron based at Sowley scrambled and intercepted it at 1000 ft over the Solent, then crammed with the invasion armada, their machine guns and cannon forcing it down toward the River, where the shore line Bofors guns joined in; Shute credits them with scoring a hit on the fin; (if this was the case this would have been the Smugglers Grove gun). The stricken aircraft passed close to the House, still dogged by the Typhoons, and crashed into the boggy area at the corner of the Park, its engines being ripped off and ploughing across the road into the next field some distance away.

Leading Seaman Reginald 'Tug' Wilson was unaware as he shaved, as he did every day with his trusty cut-throat razor, that on the morning of April 18th he was going to have a second close shave.

On the 17th April 1944 Tug's wife Win gave birth to his daughter Wendy in Fawley. Tug, keen to see the babe, arranged for a colleague 'Dinger' Bell to take over his watch. Next morning Tug checked the guard at Lepe and was cycling back to his billet at HMS Mastodon along Inchmery Lane.

Tug was aware, as he pedalled towards the base, of gunfire, the Bofors gun in the marshes close by was barking in anger, the first and only time it had done so during the war. He could also hear the familiar growl of Merlin engines and the distinctive throb of German BMW radials- everyone learnt to differentiate between enemy and friendly aircraft noise- there was no point in diving for cover whenever 'friendlies' went over- interspersed with the staccato stutter of cannon and machinegun fire.

A Typhoon fighter soared skyward over Tug's head. Looking over the hedge he saw an alarming sight. The all-black Junkers 188 was bouncing across the field directly towards him spewing debris and flames before coming to an abrupt halt, nose down in a swampy pond twenty yards from the road where it was engulfed by a fireball of exploding fuel vapour. From the corner of his eye he must have seen two bodies thrown clean out through the Perspex cockpit. *'I had to bike like hell to get out of the way,'* he said as the engines broke loose and rolled *'like two huge balls of twisted metal'* through the hedge and across the lane.

'I consider myself very lucky,' he commented afterwards. *'If I had been five seconds later, I would have been run down by one of those engines. There was nowhere to go, or even time to think of it.'*

On D-Day Tug made four trips with his landing craft from a troop carrier (LCT) to the beaches. After leaving his barge he took his White Ensign for safe keeping, giving it to his wife, Win, on his return home. She was appalled at the flag's condition- near shredded with bullet and shrapnel holes- studiously darning and sewing each rent and tear.

The Ju 188, under normal circumstances, would have carried 4 crew. However, 7 bodies were recovered from the wreckage, some of whom had Slavic names. This gave rise to the second story that the plane's extra bodies were either its ground crew or Czech and Polish defectors. Shute's novel makes great play on the fact that the plane dropped its wheels, a recognised signal that it was surrendering. The dead were all non-commissioned officers.

Other pundits feel that it was possibly changing base or had got lost on a training flight with a 'rookie' pilot with his ground crew on board for the ride. However, three men had been awarded the Iron Cross, as these were taken from the bodies, which indicates that they were veterans not 'rookies'.

The third explanation, which is backed up by recollections of conversations garnered at the time, was that the plane was, according to the R.A.F.'s salvage unit at the time, one of the most advanced German photo reconnaissance planes. It purportedly contained a photographic developing laboratory in the bomb bay area

instead of bombs. The extra personnel on board could have been the technicians who operated this equipment.

History also relates that one of the R.A.F. men took a pistol from a dead German, flourishing it as men are wont to do, accidentally pulling the trigger. It went off, luckily the bullet went between his companions!

Whatever the truth of their mission the Germans and their plane paid the ultimate price for flying over the assembled invasion fleet. According to another eyewitness the remains were so shot up that it resembled a flying sieve.

THE AUSTER CRASH.

Giving additional weight to the third explanation is that, when news of the crash was transmitted to the higher authority, experts were dispatched to check it out. Around mid-day an Auster single engine light aeroplane arrived and landed on the field in front of Blacklands House. Eyewitnesses report that the pilot was a young Canadian officer. He apparently spent the next hour or so chatting up the land girls who were working nearby, jokingly offering them rides in his plane; they declined as the 'cover' story for his landing had been 'engine trouble'.

A second officer, who either came with the incoming plane or was to be picked up by it, came with some of the equipment retrieved from the bomber. However, the extra weight rendered the plane too heavy. It clipped the top of the trees by the Green Cottages, nose-diving into the field beyond, where it burst into flames killing both pilot and passenger and destroying whatever valuable information and cargo it was carrying.

It would be logical that the crash must have been thoroughly checked out, since the Junkers had penetrated the most sensitive area in the whole of the UK. It would also be highly likely that both sides would make up cover stories as to the true nature of the incident.