

Report on meeting of September 2nd 2025 Edward Hilditch: The Diaries of Ernest Wakefield 43-45

Inspired by reading the diaries of Samuel Pepys, Ernest Wakefield kept a diary from the 1890s until his death in 1963. He lived in Elworth and was employed at Fodens. As well as recording what was happening at work, and various family matters, he gave his views on events in Europe. Edward Hilditch, his grandson, has transcribed the diaries and returned to Sandbach History Society to talk about the period 1943-45.

Edward said that the diary entries for 1942 were very pessimistic with British defeats, the fall of various strategic sites such as Singapore and the threat of losing control of the Suez Canal. People did not know how the war would end, and times were uncertain.

However, by the start of 1943, the diary entries indicate that things were starting to improve. Britain had hit back against the Germans with massive bombing raids over cities such as Cologne. The threat of invasion had receded and local signposts, which had been taken down early in the war to confuse invading troops, were being re-instated.

Diary entries related to family matters also reinforced this improving optimism. Ernest's brother, Jim who worked for Rolls Royce at Derby was involved in the development of aeroengines which powered Spitfires, Lancasters and other fighter aircraft. He was considered an important person and had been sent to Scotland for his own safety at the start of the war. In 1943 the threat of kidnapping by the Germans had lessened and he was allowed to return to Derby. Meanwhile normal life continued with events such as the Congregational Church AGM, the annual Sunday School Anniversary concert and visits to the cinema in Sandbach.

The diary records the daring bombing raid on the dams in the Ruhr valley in May 1943. This caused six million gallons of water to spill over the countryside, which impacted on industrial production and led to the loss of many lives.

Mr. Hilditch said that we know about this event from the film "The Dambusters" and that it was a great boost to morale in this country. He showed a photograph of the type of Lancaster bomber involved in the raid with the crew of seven standing in front and the much larger number of support staff behind them who were needed to maintain the aircraft.

By the end of 1943 Ernest wrote, "There is more hope than at any time during this terrible war." In the New Year he commented that an invasion of northern France was expected and then in March there was news of a travel ban for ten miles along the coast from the Wash to Land's End as preparations were being made for the invasion. A great deal of secret work was involved including creating two temporary harbours to allow landings in Normandy as the Germans believed that the invasion would have to take place near Calais where there were docks.

Meanwhile at home, a diary entry records that Ernest Wakefield was promoted at Fodens from chief draughtsman to chief surveyor as production changed from tanks to trucks. Edward's arrival in the world was recorded when Ernest's daughter Kathleen gave birth to a baby and later in the year his christening is mentioned.

Details of D Day are given in the diary. Four thousands vessels and seven thousand small ships landed allied troops on the Normandy beaches. The diary entry records that casualties were low. However, Mr. Hilditch said that we know now that there were in fact high casualties at Omaha Beach where the Americans landed. On this beach many of the amphibious tanks which were launched before the troops disembarked sank in the rough seas. This meant that the infantry had fewer tanks to support them as they landed. Tanks on the other four beaches suffered no such problems.



Sherman DD Amphibious Tank, 1944 (Wikipedia, Creative Commons)

Mr. Hilditch said that he had been surprised to read in the diary that only a few months later large numbers of people were arriving in Sandbach and other towns in the Northwest from London. This was due to the dangers caused by the latest German weapon, the V1 rocket or doodlebug which were targeting the capital. Seventy-five children arrived by train on one day and had to be billeted in the area. The people in London who had gone through the Blitz in 1940 were now suffering again.

In Elworth, daily life continued, and the Wakefield family went on holiday to Aberystwyth spending time on the beach and going to the cinema. Further afield, a number of events such as the unsuccessful airborne mission at Arnhem, dramatised in the film "A Bridge Too Far", and the failure of the bomb plot against Hitler meant that 1944 ended on a sombre note.

However, the diary records show that events moved fast in the first months of the New Year. The conference at Yalta between Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin where plans were made for the post-war reorganisation of Europe and Germany are described. Mr. Hilditch showed a photograph of the three leaders at the conference and said that on a holiday to Crimea, he had visited and photographed the exact spot where this meeting had taken place.



Yalta Conference, 1945: Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin (Wikipedia, Creative Commons)

Other diary entries record the blanket bombing of Dresden, the shooting of Mussolini and the suicide of Hitler. Finally in May 1945 Germany surrendered and the war in Europe was over. Ernest records the joy and excitement of VE Day in Elworth. There was a National Holiday, a street party, a thanksgiving service at the Church in Hope Street and a broadcast by the King.

Throughout the diary there is mention of Ernest's son Lawrence who had been away from home since the start of the war. He was in India with the Royal Engineers, building runways. Airmail letters from him arrived as did parcels of tea. In 1943, Ernest mentions that he was particularly missed at Christmas, as this was the fifth year that he had been away. Then in an entry for early 1945, Ernest states that he came home from work one day and found his son sitting in the parlour drinking a cup of tea.

The diary entries indicate that Lawrence's best friend, Geoffrey Faulkner, was not so lucky. He spent the first years of the war in Canada training pilots. In the latter years he returned to Britain as fewer pilots needed to be trained, since the battle for the air had been won. Geoffrey returned to being an RAF pilot and while on a raid his plane crashed over the North Sea, and he was killed. His name is recorded on the Elworth War memorial.



Elworth War Memorial (photograph by Richard Vickery)

Mr. Hilditch finished his talk by mentioning diary entries describing the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August. Whilst celebrating the end of the war in Japan, Ernest also expressed the horror at the development of these new weapons.