

How **BICESTER** Has Changed

Bicester Home Guard

Figures of fun or does comedy hide a more serious truth?

"Don't panic Captain Mainwaring!" and other memorable phrases from the popular television comedy series 'Dad's Army' have coloured our view of Britain's citizen army formed during the dark days of World War II, seventy years ago. Is this a fair reflection of the contribution of more than a million volunteers who vowed to defend their country?

Bicester and surrounding villages, like many other communities, responded quickly to a government call to form a home defence force in May 1940 when invasion seemed imminent. Local Defence Volunteers signed up at the old Bicester Police Station in Church Street. Equipped with little more than a few shared shotguns and armbrands, the force organised itself to patrol the local area, guard key installations such as railways and public services and establish observation posts to watch for enemy parachutists.

Volunteers consisted of veterans who had seen service during World War I, those too young to be conscripted into the regular forces or men who were deemed

to be in reserve occupations. Road blocks were manned by Home Guard units and local defences such as pill boxes were constructed to halt the advance of enemy forces. In July 1941, Prime Minister Winston Churchill named the volunteers the Home Guard. As the war progressed Home Guard Battalions became better trained and were equipped to work alongside regular forces. Uniforms were issued - not always of the correct size - and weapons became more sophisticated and plentiful. Most volunteers held day time jobs and trained with the Home Guard during the evening and at weekends. Many undertook fire watching duties to warn of night time air raids.

When it was disbanded in December 1944, the Bicester Battalion had sixty two officers and over one thousand six hundred other ranks in Bicester, Kidlington, Woodstock and Deddington. Thankfully, the effectiveness of the Home Guard against highly trained enemy forces was never put to the test. Nevertheless, looking back at the 70th anniversary of the Home Guard, one has



Home Guard Conference at Church House Barbury Jack Bonner, Bill Dean, George Gander and Jim Tyrell

to admire and respect the contribution of volunteers who pledged to defend their community.

Alongside is a picture of the Bicester Company of the Home Guard taken in 1944. Bicester Local History Society is conducting a research project to find out more about the Bicester Battalion to mark its 70th.

If you can identify any members of the unit or have any information concerning the local Home Guard please contact Pete Chivers on 01869 600109.

There will be a talk and exhibition relating to the Bicester Home Guard at Bicester Library at 7.30 p.m. on Monday 1 November 2010. Admission is by ticket only, available from Bicester Library, at a cost of £3.00. Numbers are limited and proceeds will be donated to the British Legion Poppy Appeal and "Help for Heroes".



Above: Home Guard Bicester Platoon 1944



Right: Home Guard Training Bicester Bill Dean uses Ginger Halford as the range

Ghosts & Foul Deeds History Walk

Bicester Local History Society celebrates the Halloween season with an invitation for residents to take part in a walk around Bicester to explore a darker side of the town's history! The walk will track down ghostly stories that

have evolved and some of the foul deeds that have taken place among the sleepy streets. This is not for those of a nervous disposition!!!

The first walk is scheduled to take place on Thursday 11 November at 7.30p.m. starting at Bicester Library

in Old Place Yard. It will be repeated on Thursday 18 November at 7.30 p.m. Numbers will be restricted to 25 persons per walk. If the walk is oversubscribed, the society will organise additional walks at a later date. As this is an evening walk, we advise those taking

part to dress in highly visible clothing. The route is approximately 1 1/2 miles and will take around 1 1/2 hours to complete.

The cost for the walk is £3.00 per person. Advance booking is essential. Please contact Pete Chivers on 01869 600109.