

The crowds that packed Sheep Street to welcome troops returning from overseas duty in Afghanistan, Cyprus and Iraq emphasises the special place the military holds in the affection of Bicester.

The town's links with the armed forces can be traced back many centuries although as Peter Chivers explains occasionally the relationship has not been as cordial as the recent celebration.

Bicester's strong military ties were really established in the twentieth century, when the town figured in the military campaigns that define the period. As we see in the annual Remembrance Day service, the sacrifice of local volunteers who fought in the great battles of the First World War is recorded at the local Parish Church. The town itself supported the wider war effort with fund raising events to provide comforts for the troops and a Red Cross Hospital for wounded soldiers was established at what is now Home Tree House in London Road. The Second World War intensified military activity around the town as army camps were set up nearby and local airfields supported both operations and the training of RAF crews. Local volunteers became members of the Home Guard, Civil Defence, the Fire, Police and Ambulance Services.

Yet Bicester's military links go back much

Bicester's Proud Military Heritage

further than the conflicts we commemorate today. Successive invaders – Romans, Saxons and Normans – have occupied the local area and their forts and castles served not only as protection but also as a means of controlling the lives of local people.

Bicester suffered particularly badly during the English Civil War in the 17th century when it was occupied at different times by both sides in the conflict – Cavaliers and Roundheads. It was customary at that time for food and supplies to be requisitioned by armies on the march, often leaving the townspeople without food for themselves!

Thankfully the general tax payer now provides for servicemen and women. Probably the most significant development for Bicester was the establishment of the Ordnance Depot in 1941 to provide supplies and support for the Allied landings in Normandy in 1944. The Cold War and current conflicts have ensured the Depot remains an important strategic facility. Military bases in the area remain an important source of local employment.

Bicester has also been a recreation centre for service personnel. Older residents may recall the boisterous activities and inter-service rivalry between units stationed in the area during the Second World War,



which sometimes erupted in the Market Square.

The Welcome Home parade shows the pride and affection the town continues to hold for those who serve with such distinction on our behalf. The commitment to positive links between Bicester and the armed forces serving in the area has never been stronger than at present. Long may this continue.

