

## **Milton Court In Wartime**

We gained a very interesting addition to our archives after last year's Heritage Weekend when a visitor to St John's Chapel very kindly loaned us some material about Milton Court. This included wartime editions of the 'Henley Telegraph', the house journal of Henleys, the firm that took over Milton Court in 1939. They gave a fascinating insight into life at Milton Court during the war and the way people coped in those difficult times.

The popular image of Britain in 1939 is of a nation muddling through, ill-prepared for war. This is far from the truth - we were well prepared in many ways, particularly for home defence and for changing to a wartime economy. Plans were laid for key companies to move from cities to safer places in the countryside, and it was this that brought Henleys to Milton Court.

Henleys made cables and tyres - both of strategic importance. The firm had its head office in Holborn, which needed to move, and factories in Woolwich and Gravesend which unavoidably had to stay put. The company already had staff in Dorking and a reconnaissance visit to the area took place on 3 July 1939. Most of the staff were to go to Milton Court; the tyre company to Springfield House. The order to move was given on 1 September, two days before war broke out.

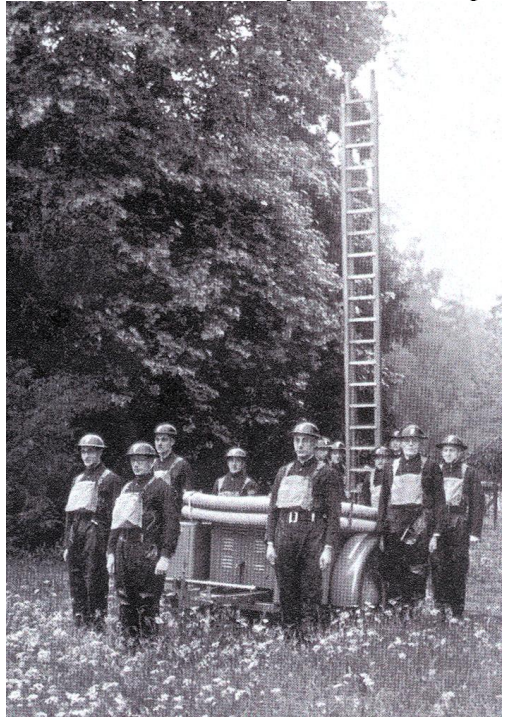
The Henley Telegraph had been running since 1919 and kept staff informed throughout the company. On the outbreak of war it published a special emergency edition with a lead article entitled 'So this is Milton Court' which painted an idyllic picture of the house and grounds. 'Milton Court still has its bowling green' ran the description, 'and a double hedge of yew against which the multi-coloured blooms of the Michaelmas daisies have shown to their best; an apple orchard; roses, roses all the way; grey willows overshadowing its mill stream; lawns which are velvet carpets; and a half-timbered mill house...' Sadly, much of this would have to change in the months to come.

Milton Court had to be altered to provide working accommodation for about 275 people. An office wing, with kitchen and dining room had to be built. The main house was to become sleeping accommodation with cubicles for

190 people, with others sleeping in the lodges and a large army hut put up in the grounds.

The chauffeur's house became a six-bed sick bay. An ARP system was set up and air-raid shelters were to be built. Milton Court was also to have its own fire brigade.

The move itself was not without its problems. Company records and equipment were sent in six 20-ton lorries. One got lost on the way – it was the first night of the blackout. The others reached Milton Court but couldn't get through the entrance arch! Everything had to be off-loaded and manhandled the rest of the way. To cap it all the caterers who had been booked wanted to turn the job down as they felt it was beyond them. After much gentle persuasion they agreed to take it on.



**Milton Court ARP Wardens**

All this had involved an enormous amount of work over just two months. The Company paid a warm tribute to the head gardener, Mr Mansey, and his staff; who had been immensely helpful in solving problems along the way and seeing it through. 'Freddy' Rogers, who led the move, referred to him as 'a good friend; he knew all the nooks and crannies in the place and we were lucky to have him with us'.

Once the staff were in, the social activities soon got organised. The accounts branch started a choir for regular sing-songs and everyone pitched in for a 'tip-top' concert on Halloween Night. The Woolwich Works Concert Party came down to give a show and a Supper Club came into being. As the 'Telegraph' commented 'when men and women are suddenly thrown

together... they become themselves; and a flood of “mateyness” is released. Never has the Social Spirit at Henley’s had such a kick in it. It has made us appreciate the value of “mucking in” and we’re going to “muck in” a lot more yet.’

And “muck in” they did. The national Dig for Victory campaign was under way and an Allotment Society was started. Head gardeners Mansey and Graysmark (from Bury Hill) gave a talk on what to grow and how to grow it. Results were rather mixed to start with and weeds were a problem. Mr Mansey kept a fatherly eye on everyone and eventually they flourished. The first allotment competition was held in July 1940 and Chairman Sir Montague Hughman presented the prizes.

Social activities continued to swing through 1940. A new Years’s Eve Dance Was held at The Hut in Westcott. Spring

dances were held in ‘The White Horse’ in Dorking and The Henley Players put on ‘Pygmalion’ at The Hut. Sports teams had mixed results; the netball team lost 26-8 to the CEB at Horsley Towers, but the football team did well - until they played Westcott (lost 11-2). Badminton at The Hut proved popular and the cricket side played at the Westcott club ground on Tuesday evenings.



**Mr Mansey**

A report of the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Henletel Art Show appeared in the summer issue of 1940. This featured paintings, photography and handicraft exhibits. Some of them were reproduced in the ‘Telegraph’ which show them to be of a very high quality. First prize went to Alan Brewer for his painting of ‘The Old Mill House’ – at Milton Court. He was a very talented artist and did fine topical cartoons for the Telegraph. He acted as Chief ARP Officer for Milton Court and later became Scoutmaster of the Westcott scout troop.

The ‘Telegraph’ also announced staff appointments, transfers, promotions and retirements; it also reported marriages and the presents that had been given. Miss Elsie Gadd was the first member of staff to be married after the

move to Milton Court and she was given a cabinet sewing machine and a canteen of cutlery. Present-giving remained very much the practice for some time, but was increasingly difficult as luxury goods became scarce. Money gifts were the norm by 1942.



**The Old Mill House by Alan Brewer**

Staff announcements then began to include the lists of those called up to the Forces. Sadly, and inevitably, came the casualties. One was J.M.Abbott whose mother wrote to say he had been killed on the *Jervis Bay*, in one of the most famous actions of the war. *Jervis Bay* was an armed merchant cruiser escorting a convoy when it was attacked by the German battleship *Admiral Scheer*. Facing impossible odds *Jervis Bay* attacked the *Scheer* but was hit repeatedly. She sank quite quickly but her action enabled most of the convoy to escape. Her commander, Captain Fogarty Fegen, was awarded a posthumous VC.

Another piece of bad news was the destruction of the company's head office in the blitz. Although this proved the wisdom of moving away from London, Milton Court itself had a near miss in August 1940. Despite these setbacks life had to go on and everyone made the best of it. Wounded troops were regularly entertained at Milton Court; coaches were hired to pick them up

from hospital for tea and entertainments followed by a dance. Young ladies from Milton Court went to the return dances at the hospital.

Support for good causes was a regular feature of life at Henleys and events of all kinds helped to raise funds. Comforts were sent for victims of the blitz, and parcels went to the troops. The typists suggested a scheme to raise the purchase price of a Spitfire and the staff soon raised the first instalment of £1000. In 1941 they contributed £4104 to Dorking War Weapons Week held from 1<sup>st</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> March. In this one week, the town as a whole raised the sum of £311,136 17s 10d, an astonishing achievement.

Henleys choir played an important part in cultural life both for the staff and the local community. Vaughan Williams came to Milton Court on Tuesday evenings to rehearse them and they took part in the Dorking Music Festival the following April. In May 1941 the Company presented Dr Vaughan Williams with an inscribed gold fountain pen in appreciation of his help. In his speech of thanks Vaughan Williams said that 'We musicians generally are unoccupied in war time...but when the suggestion was made that I might help with your singing, here was an obvious piece of war work and I am delighted to have been of assistance.'

In the summer of 1942 the 'Telegraph' came out in a much smaller version, printed on low quality paper. The editorial explained that paper restrictions were responsible and said 'we conform to the regulations gladly, while believing that 'The Henley Telegraph' is playing a real part in the National effort. We believe many things about the 'Telegraph'. One is that even in battle dress it will continue to serve the purpose it has always served – to knit together the best interests of the staff and Company.' It certainly achieved this aim – and in no small measure. What comes across so strongly from its pages is the wonderful spirit that ran through the company and the way it carried everyone through<sup>1</sup>.

*Peter Bennett*

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<sup>1</sup> The series of Henley Telegraphs loaned to us ended with the summer 1942 issue but since writing this article the Local History Group has received a complete set from Shirley Green, Alan Brewer's daughter. Alan was a great asset to Westcott not only because of his active involvement in the social life of Henley's whilst they were at Milton Court but because he also revitalised the Westcott Scout troop, helped establish the Westcott Angling Society and performed with the Westcott Players.