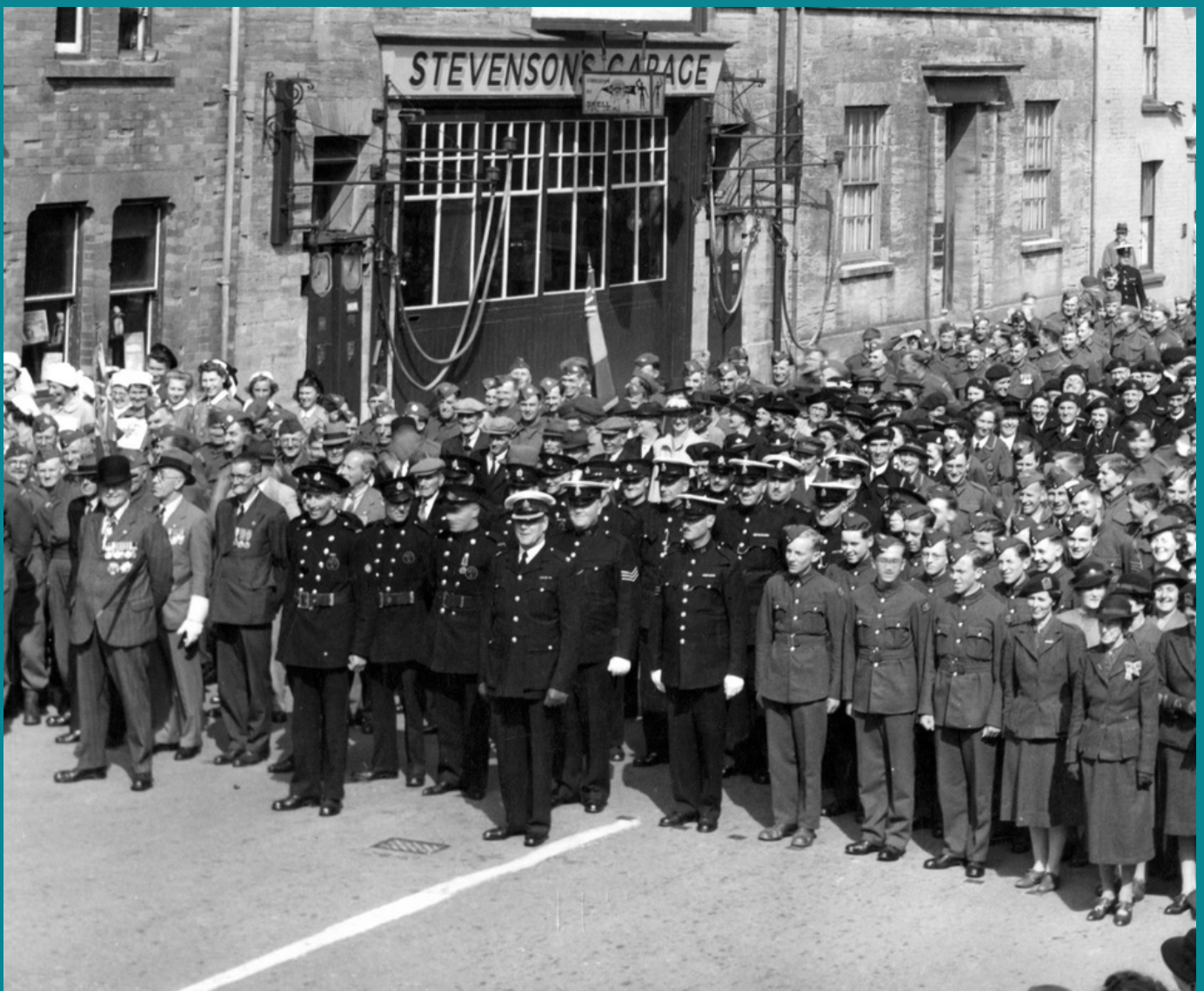


VE Day in Bridport: a window onto everyday life 80 years ago



What was Victory in Europe Day like in Bridport 80 years ago? One of the local papers recorded the day:

Bridport was in triumphant mood, and the town was bedecked with flags and bunting. Late at night many people waited outside the Town Hall festooned with flags in the hope of seeing the building flood-lit, but owing to the five miles coastal black-out, which has not been lifted, they were disappointed.

The main formal celebrations were a united church service attended by representatives of local organisations together with the Mayor and Mayoress (Mr and Mrs S.J. Gale). This was Sidney Gale, net manufacturer, who was until recently commemorated in Bridport at the recently-closed care home on Flood Lane which bore his name. The Mayor said, 'Now German organised resistance has ceased in Europe and elsewhere every man and woman in this country can take a personal pride in the wonderful victory that has been achieved'. After the service many remained for community singing. Earlier in the afternoon 1,200 schoolchildren were given a tea and ices in the town's two Drill Halls. The day was rounded off by two dances, with the proceeds going to the Services' Welcome Home Fund. However, it would be some time before demobbed service men and women could be welcomed back to the town.

The general atmosphere can also be sensed from other local reports. In nearby Charmouth, the church bells rang out 'when it was heard that victory was assured'. Not only were there thanksgiving services but also 'an impromptu social and dance at the Church Hall was attended by happy crowds, who ceased their merry-making to listen intently to the King's Speech relayed in the Hall'. Meanwhile, 'Another light-hearted crowd gathered in the main street to sing and dance to the music of a piano until a late hour'. The next night two wireless sets provided music for dancing so that 'the festive spirits were kept going until the early hours'.

Some were busy in other ways. On the evening of VE Day, fire crews from Charmouth and Bridport were called out to deal with a gorse fire on the hill at Hardown, Morcombelake. No damage was done to property and the Brigade returned at about 1.30am.

How do we know?

Looking at newspapers of the time we get glimpses of what over five years of war had meant for Bridport people. If you want to have a look for yourself, Bridport Museum's Local History Centre has microfilmed copies of the Bridport News (arrange an appointment to see them) or you can search digital copies of the Western Gazette, which covered Dorset (www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk).

Here are a few examples of references to Bridport in the Western Gazette in early May 1945. There are plenty of echoes of issues that we are still concerned with 80 years later. One is the way in which advertisers tied their products, however spuriously, to the mood of the times. As you can see at the top and tail of this piece, both Oxo and Milk of Magnesia managed to give a topical ring to their blandishments to buy their products.

Another issue was food. Bridport Women's Institute was an active participant in Dorset Markets, a scheme where produce from cottage gardens and allotments could be sold to the public. Bridport women attended the Dorset WIs annual meeting in Dorchester where they heard a plea from the national WI: 'it was up to producers to see that when the fighting ended there was no slackening of effort and that the food was properly distributed without any waste. They had begun in Dorset in a small way and had a great many difficulties, especially in regard to transport, but if they persevered they stood a good chance of building up something worthwhile'. Still today, Bridport people continue to take action on food (its availability, increasing cost and trying to prevent waste) through the Food Bank, Plastic Free Bridport and all the productive allotments across the town.

The WI had prospered in Dorset and by May 1945 they had a membership of over 6,000 organised in 138 WIs. Some of their activities were as you might expect: Dorset WI members had recently knitted over 4,000 garments for children in war-torn Europe and sent cigarettes out to the Dorset Regiments in Burma. And of course there was prodigious jam making: half a million people in Britain had their jam ration provided by the WI. But their members were also engaged citizens, even during wartime. At the annual meeting of Dorset WIs just before VE Day, Bridport WI moved a resolution, seconded by Walditch WI, that strongly disapproved of the Government's exclusion of the Women's Land Army from the scheme for post-war benefits and gratuities. The issue was if and how to acknowledge the work of key workers in a crisis. The Bridport speaker described the arduous and exacting nature of the land girls' work: they were, she claimed, the backbone of England. But such overt criticism of government did not get the backing of sufficient other Dorset WIs to make it local policy.

As the war edged towards its conclusion, Dorset WIs voiced concerns about matters that still require campaigns decades later. They wanted children to be protected from the dangers of road traffic. They called for maternity beds to be available in all hospitals in Dorset and were particularly worried about the difficulties of service men's wives living in just a few rooms: 'We must make sure that there are conditions fit for heroes' babies to be born in'. They wanted to see stronger penalties for child neglect and cruelty but noted, 'Home conditions were not likely to be improved if a father was sent to prison and the family deprived of his income'. And prior to the creation of the welfare state they voiced concerns about the continuation of old poor law ways: they thought that husbands and wives should be allowed to stay together rather than parted when they went to live in an old people's home. Many were housewives and were keen for girls to learn more homecraft at school: 'Girls should learn that the running of a home was something of which to be proud and not a drudgery which did not merit much thought'.

Maternity services were a particular issue in Bridport in May 1945. There were fears that the local maternity ward might be closed as there was a shortage of staff at Bedford House. The temporary matron was a midwife but said she was not prepared to undertake maternity cases personally day and night. You can almost hear her exhausted voice in the report: she said she was over age, and her appointment was not permanent. It clearly did not help that apparently one of the reasons for staff shortages was that the Ministry of Labour and National Service would not direct people into nursing.

Matching up workers with suitable employment was an issue in May 1945. Even in wartime, with the working population mobilised for war production, there were still workers seeking employment and others advertising to fill posts. Francis Sims, Mythe Cottage, Melpash advertised, 'Farm Labourer Seeks Situation. General farm work required'. However this was an area of work where low pay was endemic. It is noticeable that days after the VE Day celebrations, a different sort of meeting was held in Bridport. This was at the Hope & Anchor Inn and it was part of a special campaign in Dorset by the National Union of Agricultural Workers. All farm and rural workers were welcome, including women workers. Trying to get a living wage in agriculture was as important in the war as it had been before it. However it was hard to sustain trade unions in Dorset so this is quite a striking Bridport event. Maybe this was the kind of event that prompted an advertisement for a property sale to describe Bridport as 'a progressive Market Town'.

Women were also looking for paid work. According to the columns of the Western Gazette, women generally sought work as housekeepers and servants. Here's one example: 'Lady with child, 2 years. Seeks Happy Homely Situation'. She might have responded to Mrs Woods of Shute Haye, Walditch who advertised for a Cook-General. Her offer was described as: 'Help given. Two in family. Own bathroom and radio. Close to town and sea. Comfortable situation'. Maybe the radio made all the difference! There were also other local opportunities for women. The St James Secretarial College of Grosvenor Place, London had opened a country branch at Bradpole aimed at 'Girls desiring a First-Class London Training. Residential or Daily'.

A free scholarship and memorial bursaries were offered. Some of the local entertainment also has a modern ring. West Dorset Young Farmers met in Bridport Town Hall soon after VE Day keen 'to discover and develop natural local ways of expression'. There was singing, including of some excellent and rare Dorset Folk Songs, as well as dancing and mime which by the end of the evening was worked up into a performance of a masque. Compliments were paid to the young people's 'obvious spontaneity and enjoyment': 'this was true recreation because it revived essential things'. Precursors of today's Bridport Mimmers' Society perhaps?

Just as entertainment and leisure were part of everyday life in May 1945, so was politics. The general election was to be held on 5 July that year and the local Conservatives were preparing. Their new agent, Arthur Cowley, formerly agent for Newcastle-under-Lyme and recently returned from service in the RAF, set up office at 26 East Street. He promised to visit all polling areas throughout the constituency in the near future and said he would be glad to supply information with regard to votes. Simon Wingfield Digby had become the local Conservative MP when he was returned

unopposed at a by-election in 1941. He won the seat again in 1945 despite the national landslide to Labour. This may have been because both Labour and the Liberals put up candidates, splitting the opposition vote so that Digby sailed through with just over 50% of the poll. A lesson from the past? I couldn't possibly comment!

Prof Karen Hunt, May 2025.

