

High Wych History - 6 – Wartime in High Wych.

Percy Wilson's passing.

The second world war brought hard times to our village. By January 1941, many men were away fighting. Many families had evacuee children from London's East End staying with them. The presence of a number of airfields also caused problems in our region. There was still talk of a coming invasion. Amidst all that, "normal life" had to carry on. For most locals that meant agricultural work : hard graft.

Percy Wilson, originally from Langley in Essex moved to High Wych from Sawbridgeworth in 1938 with his wife Beryl and children. There was twenty years between the oldest and the youngest child. Percy had found work as a horse keeper with Wilfred Mynott at Actons farm and accommodation for his family in a cottage next to the farm. By 1941 the oldest Wilson child, Raymond was away in North Africa fighting with Montgomery's eighth army, and two of the older girls were "in service".

On the 21st of January the weather was awful. There had been snow recently which prevented the children from going to school. The clouds hung low when father Percy left for work. He had to take a cart with two horses and a load of manure over to Great Pennys, a farm just up the road. The idea was to meet a fellow worker from that farm, Ken Clarke, who was coming towards him, exchange carts and then return to their respective farms. As they met, two thirds of the way between Great Pennys and Actons, at 11.45 that morning, bombs were dropped from a German aircraft.

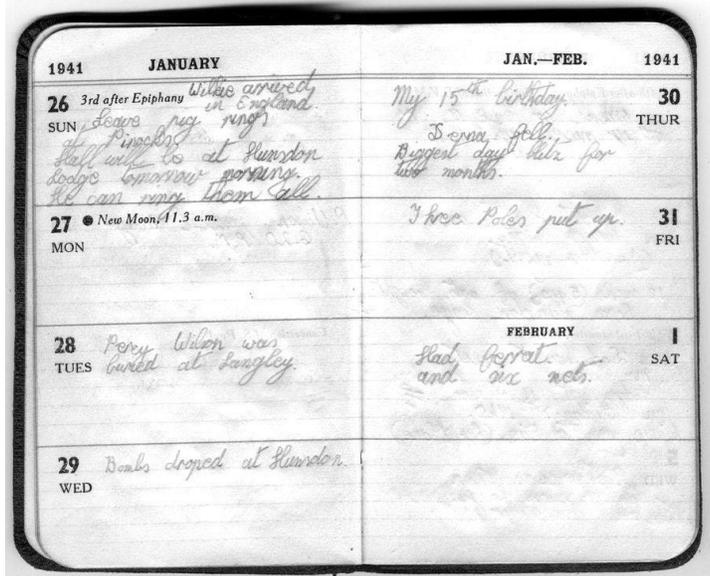
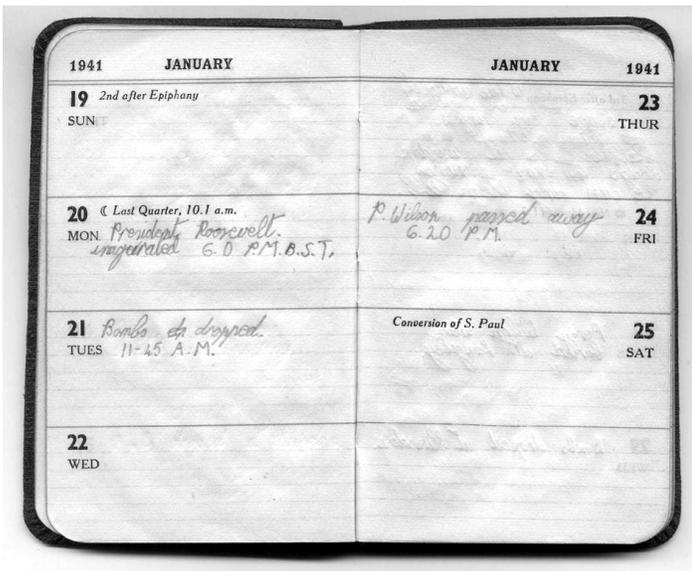
The aircraft was one of a convoy that had set out that morning in order to bomb Cambridge. It was part of the infamous "Baedeker offensive", when the Nazis targeted cities of cultural importance literally picking them from a travel guide. Because of the bad weather however the pilots turned back and, as so often, dropped their bombs "just anywhere" in order to lighten their load and get home more quickly. It just happened to be in our parish, on that particular road, at that particular time.

The bombs fell on and exploded right beside the two farm workers and their horses. Ken Clarke lost his hearing as a result but poor Percy Wilson came off worse. Several pieces of shrapnel pierced through his body causing severe injury. The horses were also hit by shrapnel and although Mr Wilson was badly injured he was still most concerned for the animals under his care. Eventually an ambulance came and he was taken to the Herts and Essex hospital at Bishops Stortford. There, three days later at 6.20 in the afternoon Percy Wilson died from his injuries. Two of the horses meanwhile had to be put down.

This left Percy's widow Beryl on her own with the task of bringing up the children. She found herself without a place to live. Luckily alternative accommodation was offered to her by the Buxton family, then owners of the big house at the Manor of Groves. There were vegetables from the garden and every now and then a rabbit. Eventually Beryl remarried. After the war, together with her new husband she moved into bigger and better accommodation in Mansfield. Beryl's new husband was the local postman and a widower himself with a young son. That son, Colin, would eventually marry one of the Wilson daughters : Mary. Today Colin and Mary have been together for 58 years.

On a bright sunny Tuesday morning recently I had the privilege of talking to 5 of the surviving Wilson children; they are older now of course but all are still very active indeed. The memory of their dead father is a dear but distant one. Peggy remembers how on that fateful 21st of January the children hid under the table and how the sounds of the aircraft outside frightened them. They tell me about their long walk to school in High Wych along the lanes and how they sometimes had to hide in the ditches as the Heinkel and Junkers bombers flew over. Mostly however, their memories are positive. They tell me how their mother had a beautiful soprano voice and was a member of the High Wych and District Choral Society. Above all they made clear how despite all the hardship they look back on the years of their youth with fondness.

Information from this article was supplied by Dawn Evans, Peggy Holden, Mary Jackson, Gill Turner, (all 4 nee Wilson), Geoff Wilson, Colin Jackson and Lily Mynott, As always, contributions to and help with this continuing History of High Wych are always welcome. Please get in touch. Contact me at theo@vanderbilt.co.uk or phone me at 01279 725468



Two pages from Chris Mynott's diary of 1941 mentioning the Percy Wilson story. Chris was 15 at the time!!



Percy Wilson with his horses



The road near Great Pennys where



Beryl Jackson (on right holding doll) in happier days : during a "silver lining concert party"