

COLIN SPURR

Colin was born in 1932 and moved to Wheathampstead in 1938, his parents ran the Bull Public House. He attended St. Helen's school until 1941, when he got a scholarship to St Albans school.

Evacuees: he remembers quite a number "it must have been a few hundred", and especially "a chap called Fisher, who had a serious fight with an invalid evacuee. There were often fights with the local lads and the evacuees. This lad's dad came down from London to stop the fight and the two boys had to shake hands to make up." Colin was friendly with a chap who was evacuated to a house opposite the Red Cow on the Hill: Colin would walk up to see him, and he would come down to the Bull to see Colin.

The Bull: the war impacted on his parent's business considerably. In 1938, when they moved to the Bull, they had 5 letting rooms for guests, and there was a dining room for about 12 -16 covers, so his parents used to do a lot of Bed and Breakfast for people staying over. That was good and Colin remembers "we had a tremendous Sunday morning trade because Geoffrey de Havilland Jnr, the son of Geoffrey de Havilland aviation pioneer, always brought a little party over for a Sunday big session and it was all quite profitable and comfortable." Then the War came, and restrictions started to escalate; beer became short and in the mid part of the war, whisky was sold under the counter to regular customers. Customers would ask "Can I have a nip from under the counter please". Beer did manage to keep going most of the time.

One thing Colin remembers from 1941 was a chap called Dan, who lived on the Hatfield Road, near where the Memorial Hall is now. He was a regular before the War. After Dunkirk he came into the pub wearing his grey coat and carrying his rifle on his shoulder, looking pretty ashen. He had been sent home and getting back into England, his first stop was the Bull. He walked in, and Colin's father was really surprised to see him. Dan said "I've just come back from Dunkirk and the most thing I need more than anything is a pint". I remember my father drawing the pint and said it's on the house. Colin also remembers an Irishman, who used to have 3 or 4 pints at the bar, getting killed in the War. The number of customers was affected during the war years but Colin remembers that the Bull also became a good place to escape to "there was a bit of sauciness: a doctor and a nurse from London, after working in the hospital, would come to the pub for a weekend break. A good place to get out of the way."

Hotels got extra rations so Colin and his parents were lucky as they got extra food. Colin recalls "mummies always look after their little boys with extra food, and therefore I didn't suffer too much." There were certain things you couldn't get: you could hardly get cream for instance and chocolate was a miss. We still had customers coming from London and we had to use our hotel rations to make sure they were properly fed. The maximum you could charge for a meal was 5 shillings.

Troops: we had a number of different troops pass through the village - a lot were stationed in the village before going to D-Day or further afield.

Garden House was used as the Officers Mess and a lot of the troops were put into Barracks, or had to sleep in tents, or other temporary accommodation like huts.

Others were billeted with people. Privates and Lance Corporals would come into the public bar of the Bull and Officers into the Lounge bar.

Colin remembers a car crash outside the pub: they had to lift the officer out of the wreck and give him first aid in the pub. He was from the Royal Dorset's.

People from the Army, going through the village, helped the pub to survive. They would come and have a drink on the nights, and we did a certain amount of business with them. It was difficult to make a lot of money to make a profit. There was such a shortage, Beer was fairly reasonable but spirits i.e. whisky short there was hardly any brandy that came from France. So, there were difficulties. One thing that used to help with food during the war was that a lot of the locals used to go out and catch a rabbit and they would bring a rabbit in and would say 'give us a pint for this guv', so we would take the rabbit for a pint of beer, and they were happy. Colin remembers "we used to serve rabbit regularly and I was brought up on Rabbit. Another speciality was tripe and onions. I hated that."

Food: Colin's mother had an account at George Simons' the Butchers . A man by the name of Tom Carling was the manager and he had three sons Mike, Peter and Derek. Mike was same age as Colin and they both went to St Albans school. Colin's mum did her shopping in the village. She used to buy meat from Simons and cabbages, groceries and green groceries from Lorna Rowe. We would buy milk from Frank Chennells and use the general store in the post office. Colin's grandfather grew vegetables for both the family and the Bull, on some land behind the Bull.

Air raid warnings: Everybody used to laugh at Wheathampstead because when the air raid warnings came you could also hear one in Harpenden one in St Albans at the same time. The first one to go off was St Albans, then Harpenden and then almost 10 minutes later in Wheathampstead . They had erected the siren on a house on the Hill: it was a high-pitched screech, and they would say 'there goes Wheathampstead Winnie, we are late again'.

Colin recalls " we had the odd bomb drop because the Germans came in over the Channel their navigating guide to get to London. "it was dead easy... they flew over that and got to London to drop their bombs, but of course they then had to turn around to go home andif you think about it, Germany its slightly higher up the globe and so they turned right (or starboard if you like) to get home and of course a lot of them came over Hertfordshire, and some went right over Wheathampstead" .

He can remember - in 1942 he thinks – he was asleep in bed and then suddenly was wide awake: a bomb had landed in the church yard just past where Barclays Bank was, that shattered some windows, and they lost a couple of windows in the Bull.

It wasn't a big bomb but the next day everyone went along to look at the bomb. Lads collected shrapnel - it was one of their hobbies during the war years. He doesn't think anyone was killed as a result of that bomb. Most people recognised whether a plane was German or British by the sound they made. He recalls there was the odd dog fight with night fighters. They would run up the street looking for empty cartridges when this happened. We used to collect those. Colin thinks they did use the tunnel at Barton House as an air raid shelter.

Colin admits to being smitten by a beautiful American girl called Audrey. She lived on Hatfield (now called Marford) Road and she knew me as 'the lad from the Bull'." She came into the Bull, and I fancied her, she was always friendly, and I would talk to her. I got upset because she found herself an American boyfriend and then bussed off to America after the war."

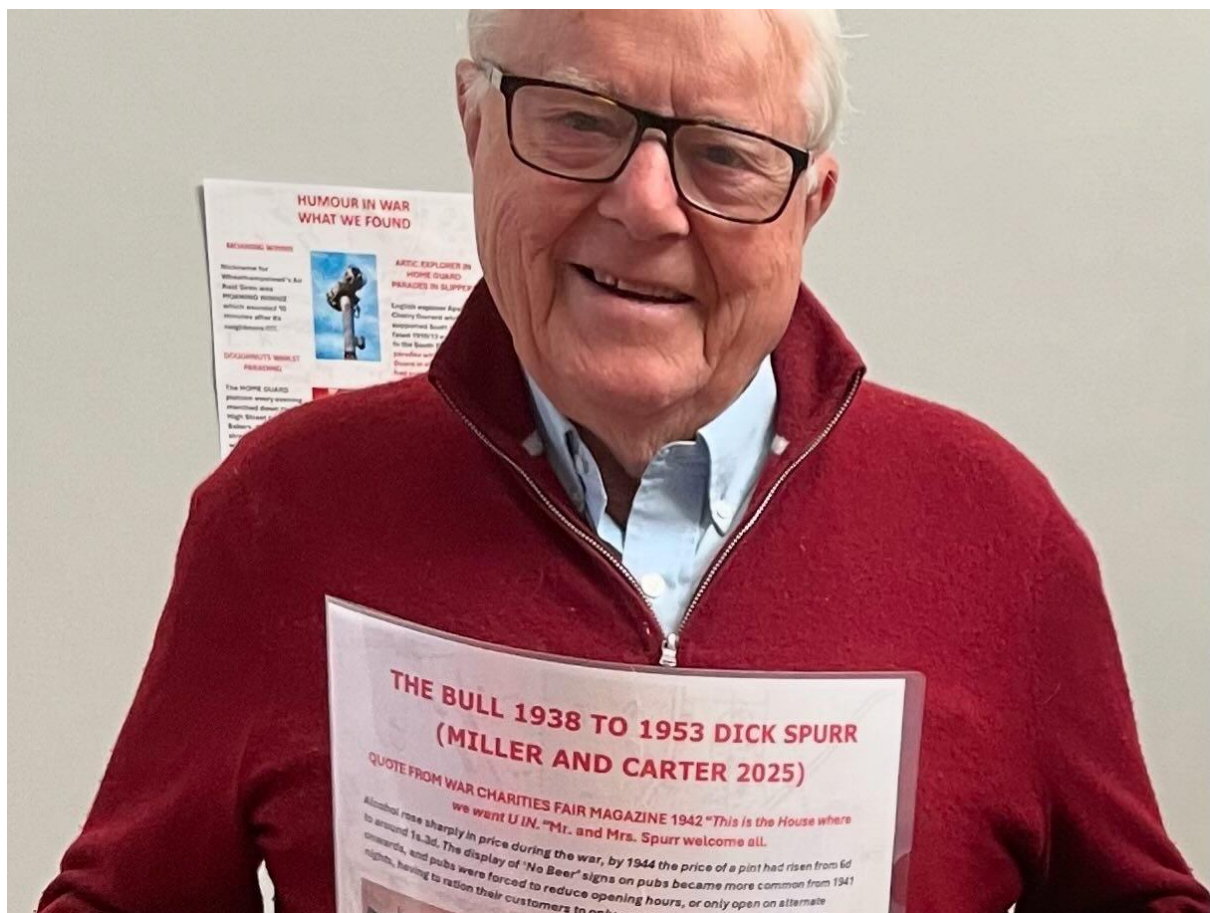
Entertainment: there was a Darts school and they used to have darts matches against the Swan. There were pub games such as 'a Bull ring to put rings on a Bulls nose' and people played a lot of dominoes. There was the odd dance, a few events at the Mead Hall, amateur dramatics and a youth club run by Miss Hall (who was also the Brownie and Cub mistress). The youth club hut was by Bury Green. Colin remembers learning morse code in the Cubs. He also believes that Winston Churchill visited the village, just after the war, but cannot remember why.

The Doctor: the years of the war were just before the National Health Service was set up. Colin remembers going to see Dr. Smallwood and when he was 15 or 16 receiving penicillin injections for boils. In those days there was a fee to see the Doctor but Dr Smallwood was known to be very generous. He charged the richer people more so that he didn't have to charge the poorer people. There were emergency services and there were ambulances which you could phone for.

VE and VJ Days: Colin went up to London with Michael Carling and his uncle and walked around London for VE day. It was celebrated over a couple of days. People were walking around the street, soldiers were coming home, people were kissing each other and the girls were kissing anyone in a uniform. He doesn't remember what was done in the village to celebrate VE day, but he does remember everyone having flags to wave.

He was in Cornwall when they celebrated VJ Day. He was woken up in the middle of the night and taken over to the window opposite the Victoria Hotel, in Newquay: people were shouting that the Japanese had surrendered.

[extracts from Colin's interview with Anne Atton & Nancy Hale in March 2024]



Colin Spurr, son of Dick Spurr who was licensee of the Bull during the war years. Colin was born in 1932.

Aged 93 years, he came to the exhibition on both days (10 and 11 May).