

The Great Escape

Squadron Leader Denys Maw, resident of the village, who lived in Rose Lane, played a small part in the "The Great Escape" as immortalised in the film of the same name. As a prisoner of war, Denys played his part in digging the escape tunnel from Stalag Luft III prison camp. On the night of 24th March 1944 many prisoners used the tunnel in a bid for freedom and a way home. One by one the men filed along the tunnel to take their turn. Denys Maw the next man in line at the exit hole after Bob McBride was standing at the bottom of the exit ladder when he heard the shot. Diving back into the tunnel he told Joe Moul, the next man behind him, and hauler Clive Saxelby, it was time to leave.

Denys managed to make it back to one of the POW huts in the camp and thus escaped being shot for trying to escape.

76 prisoners escaped but only three evaded capture. In the light of what happened to the fugitives when re-captured one could say that Denys was lucky not to have made it out of the tunnel.

Like his wife Nonwy, who worked as a code breaker at Bletchley Park and whose story is also told in this exhibition, he was reluctant to share his story. His detailed story was found in a letter written to a friend folded up in a book in a second-hand bookshop. Without this find his story may never have been known.

Wheathampstead History Society is keen to record such stories before they are lost for ever.

[Source: Written by Terry Pankhurst from Denys Maw's letter]