

LES LAMBE

Born in London within the sound of Bow Bells in 1913, Leslie came to Wheathampstead aged 8, to live with his aunt in a cottage next to the Rose and Crown at the Folly.

In 1935 he took a job with the LNER railway at Luton Hoo as a lengths man and plate layer, checking the track between Luton football ground and Benny Cole's mill at East Hyde. He eventually ended up in charge of the station at Luton Hoo as booking clerk, signalman, crossing gate keeper and porter.

He always knew when the Queen Mother was visiting, as the housekeeper or butler from Luton Hoo would come to meet her. Les had special permission to stop a train at Chiltern Green to allow members of the royal family to get on or off the London train. The train passed through the Werner estate at Luton Hoo and for each ton of coal being transported through it the toll payable by the LNER was a halfpenny. Les also remembers that the Werners "never gave their railings to the war effort".

War was declared on 1st September 1939 and Les got his call-up papers on 15 June 1940. With a baby son expected on 18th June, he was given a week's holiday.

One of Les's jobs was to transport prisoners-of-war between London and Edinburgh. The trains got bombarded along the way with stones, thrown by people in the towns. One of his prisoners was a Russian soldier being forcibly repatriated. Knowing they were going to be hanged, one of them committed suicide. "We had rifles with one up the spout with a safety catch in case of any trouble".

The stables at Kimpton racecourse were cleaned out to accommodate the prisoners. There were hundreds of prisoners at Kimpton. They were deloused and given showers and clean clothes. They had four hours exercise morning and night. They were guarded at 20 paces distance. The supervisor was Captain Essenscott and he would complain about any fraternising. There was trouble one day when one of the soldiers dropped a cigarette that a guard had passed to round to six prisoners.

St John's Ambulance Brigade First Aid courses were held in the royal waiting room at Hatfield station. Les attended them but they didn't finish until late after the last train back to Wheathampstead had gone, so he had to beg an unofficial ride on a goods train travelling back to Luton with spare parts for Vauxhall Motors. The driver had to slow down, toot the horn and wave a lamp as a clue to Les to jump off at Wheathampstead.

He has a vivid Wartime memory of a heavy air raid over Luton: he had to take shelter among the rhododendrons at Luton Hoo to protect his lorry load of three tons of high explosives ('Molotov Cocktails').

Les was chairman of the British Legion Entertainments Committee in the village.

[extracts from information in the WHS archives, provided by Ruth Jeavons]

