

Peace in our time on the Christmas Canal.

By Roy Webster.

The mood in the Norfolk countryside during Christmas 1945 had been condensed into heartfelt relief from bitter grief, agonising fear and repeated sorrow, tempered by a cautious optimism that the desired healing of damaged bodies and minds would eventually follow the end of six awful years of relentless brutal conflict in the northern hemisphere.

Yet Yuletide 1946 was not so much a victory march or celebration but rather more facing up to a grim reality that the struggle to achieve normality would continue to pose enormous difficulties nationwide.

The people knew the worst was over but also understood that the settled life they yearned for remained a distant objective barely registering on the good times ahead monitor.

On the continent, vast urban areas had been laid waste and agricultural production had virtually collapsed.

Back home, more than two million dwellings had been reduced to rubble by the Nazi Luftwaffe blitz and the V1 and V2 bombardment that mercifully was short-lived following the allies destruction of enemy launching facilities.

Many servicemen and indeed women discovered there was no civilian accommodation available after demobilisation. But thousands of corrugated iron and tin Nissen huts situated in woodland and other dark places had housed our troops rescued from Dunkirk followed later by German and Italian POWs.

These military convenience dwellings were eventually requisitioned, loosely renovated and allocated to the post-war homeless while the Government's initiative to rebuild Britain and create 20 brand new towns got under way.

Many demobbed personnel returned from the horrors of war to domestic upheaval. And happy home life for many could not resume with the contented family comfort they had left behind. Indeed, more than 100,000 disconnected people were queuing up for divorce, easily an all-time record for the UK. But those suffering the worst sadness of all were widowed Mothers with Children mourning the loss of loved ones who could never return.

Many servicemen arrived back in Civvy Street to discover they had become "perfect strangers." During hostilities women with little or no knowledge of the fate of their husbands, had accepted fresh partners including POWs who had fathered new children while some of our own soldiers had formed affectionate relationships with attractive European lasses who accompanied them to the UK demobilisation units.

There was widespread food famine throughout Europe and in this country. And, for the first time, bread was rationed, joining other staples such as meat, sugar, butter, flour, eggs, all of which, along with clothing, would remain in the sales restricted system at least until the end of that decade. Public morale clearly needed a boost, but hope had always sprung eternal, and, for the working classes, the uplifting news of 1946 was the resumption of organised Football. In addition restrictions of boating and fishing on the North Walsham, Dilham Canal were expected to be lifted resulting in the popular revival of The Whitehorse Common Angling Club.

The first Soccer league games since 1939 were played on August 31, 1946, and more than a million fans crammed into the stadiums, mostly standing room only.

In division 1 of the National league (now the Premier) the surprising result was Wolverhampton's 6-1 hammering of Arsenal, while Chelsea beat Bolton Wanderers by the odd goal of seven, and our own Canaries, in division three scored a 2-1 home victory over Cardiff.

Much to the delight of Norfolk teenagers and the chaps returning from war, goal posts were springing up on the local playing fields. Farm animals that had grazed on the unused soccer grounds were hustled off and the cow pats shovelled up. Local Leagues resumed.

The kind consideration of land owner Jack Williams allowed Canal fishing spaces below Honing Lock to Tonnage Bridge to be cut by keen local anglers in preparation for the first angling competition there for more than 7 years. Memory records the winner on a bitter winter's day was well-known Worstead sports woman and Smallburgh School teacher Ida Watts with a roach catch of 5 lbs 4oz. followed by Dilham 14 year old Dinah Mason with 3lb 8oz.

In the home, children who were hoping for a proper fir Christmas tree were to be disappointed. For, once again, the greenery parked in a pot in the corner of our living room would be the prickly branch of holly, decorated with ancient ribbon, tinsel and baubles Attractive to the eye perhaps, but not fulfilling young expectations of bulky wrapped parcels beneath soft non prickly pine branches. Christmas presents for the kids were indeed sparse, consisting of second-hand, threadbare teddies or scruffy woollen doggies missing one or both eyes, or perhaps a baby doll whose limbs had been reattached awkwardly at un-natural angles. Pre-war Hornby train sets cost the earth at second hand toy auctions while little carts were constructed from wooden boxes and pram wheels in the family tool shed.

Thus it was make do and mend for the young, with one ground-breaking exception. On November 22, 1946, a revolutionary object that made the ink well and pen nib obsolete went on sale.

It was the brainchild of the Hungarian Ladislao Biro, who gave the article its name and subsequently sold the patent to the English company RG Martin, who marketed this innovation at a cost fifty five shillings, then equivalent of half a normal weekly wage.

Beyond the pocket of a working class family you may think. Wrong! Many mums had saved up their fruit and vegetable harvesting earnings ready to buy such a special end of war Xmas present. And all over Britain the kids, returning to school for the new term, were proudly displaying a brand new Biro that worked with a rotating ball and a capillary tube filled with quick-drying ink – a writing tool that costs just 20p today.

Christmas fare in 1946 consisted of the traditional roast bird – a cockerel, goose, a brace of duck or pheasant.

Turkeys were for the rich up in “the big house” - the poultry industry's breeding of huge flocks of Norfolk Blacks was still in the future.

The policy of the wartime “dig for victory” had resulted in many more vegetable plots that were still producing adequate winter supplies of potatoes and parsnips for roasting and stalks of emerald green Brussel sprouts boiled to perfection.

More often, the bird was stuffed with steamed chestnuts gathered from the local woods and seasoned with home-grown thyme, shallots or chives, after which the traditional Christmas pudding, in this case containing dried fruit from an unmentionable source, was served with yellow saccharin sweetened custard substitute, with the routine silver threepenny bits added.

The Christmas quote of the year was: “You can keep the things of bronze and stone and give me one woman to remember me just once a year” (Damon Runyon, author of Guys and Dolls who died on December 10th, 1946).

So, we had won the war. But it had become crystal clear that winning the peace would take a little longer!

However, we in North Norfolk who loved our fishing, rambling and bird watching were cheered by a huge New Year present to celebrate the peaceful Yuletide. This was gift wrapped general access to the North Walsham, Dilham Canal which ended the war in fine fettle due to the efforts of the military in 1940. Their giant drag line dredger had deepened and widened the water to deter the then fearful, almost indestructible, German SS Panzer tiger tank that had beaten much of Europe into submission and now posed a serious threat to our own shores.

But, thanks to our brave Royal Air Force fighter pilots we won the Battle of Britain for air supremacy, forcing the NAZIS to abandon Operation Sea lion, the invasion of Britain.

Instead the Wehrmacht armies were posted to the bleak Russian Steppes where they suffered a disastrous Operation Barbarossa defeat following the siege of Stalingrad in Arctic conditions. This major military setback marked the beginning of the end of a demented Adolf Hitler and his evil band of obnoxious sadistic subordinates who aimed to rule half Planet Earth.

Thus, the military transformation of our beloved Canal into a defensive obstruction against a possible invader during the summer of 1940 may have appeared surplus to requirement but by Christmas 1946 the benefits of excavating the main channel were lauded by boaters and anglers alike.

Like our farming friend Jack Williams, other caring Canal owners, sympathetic to the recreational needs of returning nerve shattered war heroes, permitted free access to land and water while pollution was just another word in the dictionary.

Six awful years of relentless death defying human misery was countered by the therapeutic peace and propagation of the rich biodiversity of the North Walsham, Dilham Canal.

Even with makeshift pre-war and home-made fishing tackle, catches of roach, rudd, pike and perch witnessed during and after Christmas 1946 were phenomenal and doubtless acted as a helpful repair kit for war torn minds and personalities. And in the late 1960's the White Horse Club invited National Angling Champions Leicester's Likely Lads to a canal challenge whom we beat by several lbs, thanks to Joe Annison's all beating 34 lbs of Bream from the Ruston cut bend.

And if recent angling reports from this freshly restored modern day natural habitat are any guide, (see pic of Elsie with pristine perch) rod and line enthusiasts during the 2018 Christmas break can anticipate another bumper angling extravaganza.

So, all you diligent, voluntary, hardworking members of the Canal Trust who, with the assistance of Mother Nature, have succeeded in making possible this high value aquatic wild life and recreation venue are invited to step forward and take a well-deserved bow.

Here's wishing you guys and all others who may have read to the bottom of this page A HEARTY YULE TIDE CELEBRATION AND A HAPPY 74TH CONSECUTIVE YEAR OF PEACE IN OUR TIME ON OUR GREAT BRITISH ISLANDS AND HOPEFULLY MANY MORE TO COME.