

NETHERAVON, HAXTON
& FITTLETONS'

Past

Remembering our heritage



*Sam Dryden's
Boyhood Wartime Diaries*



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The History Pages

In 2011

Sam Dryden was born at Choulston, and grew up on Salisbury Plain near Netheravon Airfield during the 1940's and witnessed at first hand the impact the Second World War had on the Plain. These accounts are featured on the BBC's Wartime Experiences web pages and over the next few months we are going to serialise them together with images of Salisbury Plain taken during that war.

Here is part 1.....

I well remember the start of the war, on that Sunday morning in 1939 when Neville Chamberlain spoke to the nation. We knew war had been declared before he spoke. Where I lived at 'Ayton' in Haxton we could see the north aerodrome, R.A.F Netheravon, from the garden. Planes used for the training pilots were Hawker biplanes and we could see when they had been taken out of the hangers and dispersed around the airfield. Losses and damage to them in the event of an air raid would be less severe than if they were all in the hangers.

My father had already been recalled to the R.A.F about three months previously as he was a reservist. He was at Calshot where Sunderland flying boats were stationed and was on refuelling boats. For the next six years we only saw him on the occasional weekend and the odd week each year. As he was never able to tell us when he was coming home, it was always a nice surprise. I can still see him now coming in the door with his small brown suitcase and a revolver strapped to his side.

The siren at the aerodrome was sounded not long after the Prime Minister spoke to make sure it worked! Within a few weeks two squadrons of bombers flew into the aerodrome to be nearer to the conflict. One consisted of Blenheims to carry day-time raids, the other of Wellingtons for night bombing. They were dispersed along the southern perimeter.

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Written by Jackie Dryden

My mother became an Auxiliary nurse; Ted Hitchcock an air raid warden; Earn Barlow and George Drewatt Special Policemen. Men who joined the L.D.V (the Home Guard) included Mr Hobson and his son Charlie, Victor and Peter Mead, Vic King, Len Harris, Ron Bailey, Wilf Pearce and Paddy Quigley, and these were all people I knew from my village.

People not fit enough or unable because of their work to go into the L.D.V joined the Auxiliary Fire Service: Frank Pearce, Reg Sheppard, Harry and Fred Draper, Chris Harris and people from Netheravon were among them. They would carry out exercises where-by a smoke bomb would be let off to simulate an incendiary bomb, and then they would go through the procedure of extinguishing it and making the area safe. It was all very interesting to a boy of eleven years of age.

Many troops were moved into such places as Amesbury Abbey grounds under canvas. I saw a cousin of mine from London several times as they marched through Netheravon going to Beaches Barn field firing ranges for live firing practice; he was in the Kings Royal Rifle Corps.

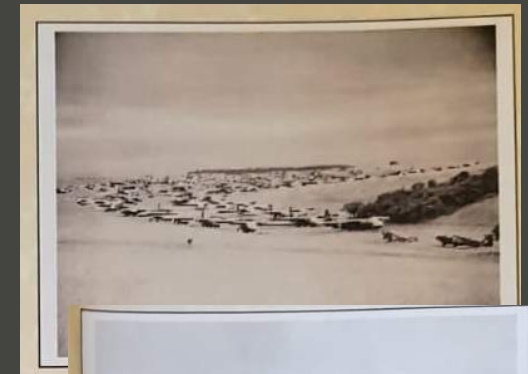
Carter Barracks near Bulford was very much enlarged by 1942. It joined up with the village to become part of Bulford Camp, as did Syrencot House and Camp. Airborne troops were stationed at Bulford from 1942 to the end of the war.

The first gliders appeared at Netheravon one Sunday evening in the form of three Hotspurs towed by Hawker Hectors. They gave a flying demonstration to high-ranking officers, which took place on the North Aerodrome, with the planes landing on the Everleigh Road. Having spotted them arrive, myself and John and Peter Mead were rather quickly up there on our bikes to witness the event. One glider actually touched down on the other side of the road and bounced over it onto the airfield.

The 1st Airborne Division were trained first. When they moved out, with the 1st Para Brigade to go to North Africa, the 6th Airborne Div were formed and trained and they remained at Bulford until the end of the war apart from the times they were in action. These times included the 'D' Day landing and Rhine crossing etc.

The troops would travel to Netheravon airfield, paratroopers learning to parachute from converted Whitley bombers, and later Dakotas, onto Abington DZ and the men of the Air Landing Brigade training to go to war in gliders (Hotspurs, Horsas and Hamilcars). The Brigade consisted of the Oxs and Bucks Light Infantry, Devonshire and Ulster Rifles plus supporting units.

The Beaches Barn field firing range was very much in use during the war, users coming from all the local camps which had greatly increased war-time populations. For example, the American 2nd Armoured Division were stationed at Tidworth and were 12,000 men strong. Other camps sprung up at Devizes, Everleigh and Shipton Bellinger, and even Home Guard units used the firing range.



* With thanks to Hannah Faver for transcribing Sam's memoirs and typing up this article. Part 2 in Issue 2.

Sam's War Time Memories Part 2

Areas out-side the firing range at Beaches Barn were used for live firing such as Sidbury Hill, where the Americans trained with the PIAT anti-tank weapon. Every type of infantry weapon in service at the time was fired on the range. Just prior to the war starting the RAF used it to give a bombing demonstration for Army officers.

Most people had an air raid shelter, they varied in type. If a family had an able bodied man he would dig a large hole in the garden. The sides and roof would be lined with corrugated iron then covered with a large mound of earth. We had an indoor "Morrison" shelter. It consisted of a sheet of steel about the size of a large table being about ½" thick with four heavy steel corner legs upon which it was fitted with steel mesh around the sides. It was in the living room which had a brick floor. We also had wire netting fitted to the inside of the window to stop glass being blown into the room if it was shattered by bomb blast. This was our safe room. Air raid shelters were erected at Netheravon aerodrome. Chalk was dug out on top of the cliff to cover them; many of them are still in existence today.



Airmen at work on repairs to the tail of a Horsa Glider are dwarfed by its great size.



The King, The Queen and Princess Elizabeth watching the airborne troop manoeuvres.



An RAF instructor explains the principles of towing a glider to SNCO pilots of the Glider Pilot Regiment.



Beaches Barn. Photo taken in September 2008

This particular evening, it was in the winter and light drizzle was falling, me and my mates were hanging around Netheravon and split up to go home just before 9 O'clock. As I walked onto the pavement just past Haxton Farm a man wearing a raincoat and trilby hat shuffled towards me, stopped and spoke as I past him. I didn't understand him and said pardon. He repeated himself. It sounded to me like a foreign language. I just took off feet hardly touching the ground. I couldn't get indoors quick enough and I was very frightened. Was it a spy or someone having me on? No one owned up to it so what could I do!

A German bomber was shot down early one morning by a Spitfire during 1943 and crashed on Larkhill ranges in Well Bottom. That evening as soon as school was over, a gang of us went onto the range to find the wreckage and hopefully some souvenirs. All the crew had been killed. It was carrying bombs and had released two which had exploded. One crater can still be found in the valley between Well Bottom and Lavington Folly. Another had exploded on impact blowing the aircraft to pieces. A fourth bomb was lying amongst the wreckage unexploded. I remember turning a piece of the plane over and finding the other side covered with blood and broken biscuits.

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Fairy Fawns (in the foreground) and Avro 504s drawn up at Netheravon just before the war. The Fawn was a light bomber whose Napier Lion engine gave a speed of 114 mph at 5,000 feet. The 504k was the standard training aeroplane developed from the operational 504 of 1914. A maximum speed of 82 mph at 6,500 feet could be obtained from the 110 h.p. Le Rhone engine.



King George VI inspects the Guard of Honour on arrival at RAF Netheravon, 19th May 1944.

The sound of voices made us think about leaving. It was American troops coming across from The Bustard camp on the same mission as ourselves. We collected some Verey Light cartridges and retreated to Fifield tank crossing where we let them off by pushing them into holes in railway sleepers and hitting the caps with a lump of iron and a nail. The bridge was made of wood then and was being repaired by Airborne Engineers from Bulford using sleepers. Mike Hughes also had a cannon shell which he let off after much deliberation causing a very loud explosion after which we beat a hasty retreat!

The RAF made small rifle range at the bottom of the cliff which had two targets, the firing point being at the end of the track below Lower Street.

A German bomber one night dropped four bombs in a line between Netheravon and Upavon aerodromes. It was about 1940-41, the bombs being only small (250 lb). The first one landed near Mile Ball Clump, the last one above Enford near Pintail Wood. This one did not explode. It was not recovered and is, at the time of writing, still there. We dug in the craters of the others collecting pieces of shrapnel for souvenirs. Air Raid Wardens kept us away from the unexploded bomb.

* With thanks to Hannah Faver for transcribing Sam's memoirs and typing up this article. Part 3 in Issue 3.

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History Pages Sam's Boyhood, War Time Memories Part 3

My mother took in lodgers to help make up the money when my father went into the RAF. The first ones were Mr and Mrs Harry May (RAF Flt Sar Transport Section Netheravon) followed by the Brink-Hursts (Navy student pilot) the Heminways (WO RAF band) and another RAF couple whose name escapes me (dental assistant) all of these stationed at Netheravon also. There was also Canadian soldier and his wife stationed at the Machine Gun School. We also had an evacuee boy, Eric Colton from East London for about two years.

A search light battery was sited at Beaches Plantation (near Beaches Barn), another Fifield Folly. When the air raid siren sounded they would sweep the sky along with others not far away but I never saw a German bomber caught in the beams. Just before the war started they would practice with small civil planes which they did often catch, but they would not have been flying as high as the Germans were.

It was exciting to watch the Home Guard training on Sunday mornings. The enemy would sometimes be regular soldiers. Several times an officer was dressed to look like Adolf Hitler, or Figheidean Home Guard would play the enemy. Once they had attacked the bridges at Choulston and Haxton dressed as women. It took a while for the Netheravon lot to realise they weren't. Once the enemy were troops from the Machine Gun School who finished the exercise by attacking the Home Guard who were defending Kites coal yard, advancing down Post Office Lane with plenty of smoke and explosions adding realism to the occasion.

Security checks on traffic were always held outside the British Legion Security, where there was of course a plentiful supply of refreshment. One duty they had to perform for a period at the beginning of the war was to keep a look-out for German parachutists dropping at night. One place they did this was on the hill at Fifield Folly where they had a hut. About six men would go there and stay all night taking it in turns to keep watch. One evening, Paddy Quigley failed to turn up at the meeting place on the main road so the others went on without him.



Hawser Glider Netheravon 1948



York Passenger Aircraft Netheravon 1949

When they came down in the morning he was standing beside the main road. When they asked him why he hadn't come up he replied, "Begorra I wasn't coming up there on my own!" He had stood on the main road all night.

Aircraft crashes occurred. A Stirling bomber crash landed close to Woodhenge with its nose about 50 yds from the main road. A Spitfire on exercise with the troops dived out of control into Buntys Folly on Larkhill ranges after its pilot bailed out. I seen it happen from Reg Sheppards farm where I worked at the time (1942-44). A Wellington bomber at the Crossbelt, Home Farm Tidworth killing all the crew and the farmer's son Mr Baker who went to help when it blew up. Mr Baker's grave can be found in the grave-yard of a small chapel in a wood just off the Tidworth to Shipton road, on the left hand side opposite the drive-way to Tidworth House. A Miles Master crashed into Triple Plantation (MR 180 504) while landing, the woman ferry pilot being burnt to death. The plantation was later felled, it being considered a hazard to flying. It has since been replanted.

A Blenheim engaged in an Army exercise laying a smoke screen (one of two) on Larkhill ranges. It flew into its own smoke and hit the ground. Two of the crew were killed. Their graves are in Netheravon graveyard. Choulston Crash site MR 134 495 S/west of Fifield Folly. The third member of the crew survived. He was saved by four farm workers who were near-by. They were Tom Manning, Andrew Shepherd, Alf Foyle and Jock Muir. The crash occurred November 1942.



Dakotas of 27 Squadron Transport Command. Netheravon 1949.



The Great Gale of Netheravon. During the night of November 4th/5th, 1918, a terrific gale completely destroyed two hangers, 12 Avro 504 K's, 2 Bristol Fighters, 1 Martinsyde & 2 Handley-Page O/400's. The 2 Handley-Page aircraft became airborne and landed half a mile away from their moorings!

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A German bomber flew down the Avon valley early one morning, the top turret gunner firing at everything in general. I leaped out of bed at the sound of firing in time to see the flashes from the gun. Ken Harris was taking his cows down to the dairy to be milked and was near the little red bridge. The first cow, a white one called Snowball had just crossed when the firing occurred. The German fired at the cows, not hitting any of them but blasting a large hole through the bank. Ken jumped over and under the bridge for cover thinking there might be more aircraft coming. The only casualty in the area was Basil Chubb who was hit in the foot by a nearby spent bullet. A lot of tiles were shattered. We searched the neighbourhood for many days looking for cartridge cases. Basil lived in one of a pair of houses situated behind the thatched cottages as you turn left at the shop by the lane going to the Methodist church. Army exercises ranged across the plain, the most regular units being Guards Armoured Div from Warminster, 6th Airborne Div and School of Artillery Larkhill. The bridges over the river were always the most important objectives on most exercises.

Aircraft flying from Netheravon taking part in Airbourne manoeuvres were first of all Whitleys and as the war progressed Dakotas, Wellingtons, Albermarle for parachute dropping and towing Horsa gliders and Hawker Hector, Miles Master and Lysanders for towing Hotspur training gliders.

Written by Sam Dryden in 1998.

* With thanks to Hannah Faver for transcribing Sam's memoirs and typing up this article. Part 4 in Issue 4.

Sam's War Time Memories Part 4

One early exercise consisted of a squadron of Whitleys each loaded with 10-12 men taking off, usually on Sunday mornings and flying away for two to three hours, reappearing to drop their loads on Ablington DZ more often than not. One day we were in the DZ watching the paras jumping. Usual height was about 400ft. We were directly below them at this particular time. Someone shouted, look-out above. One of the paras had lost his helmet as he left the plane and it was falling very fast toward us. We ran as fast as we could away and I can remember looking back seeing it bounce when it hit the ground. One of our number picked it up and gave it back to its owner, a young officer who apologised for frightening us. He had, I remember, immaculately polished boots and freshly balanced webbing.

A heavy artillery gun was sited at Bulford on the railway and when it fired onto Larkhill ranges the shells would pass over near Figheldean and Netheravon making a loud whine as they did so.



Mill Street, Netheravon
No 15



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Top left photo: The Cathedral Hangar in 1998.
Top right: Mill Street, Netheravon around 1935.
Above left: Netheravon Airfield 1958.
Above right: Dakota's at Netheravon Camp, 1944.

Another thing I will always remember were the RAF night bombers going out to raid Germany. In the summer they would appear while it was still light. They would be going over sometimes for one or two hours. The planes would be scattered over the sky well apart from each other, not in tight formation like the Americans. Leading would be the older slower aircraft, the Whitley, Manchester, Hampden; then Wellington and Sterling; finally the faster and modern Halifax and Lancaster. If it was a clear night, you might be lucky to see some of them silhouetted against the moon and stars.

My father transferred to the RAF Air Sea Rescue Service whose job it was to pick up survivors from the sea in high speed launches. A Whitley bomber crashed into a hanger at Netheravon while taking off loaded with Paratroopers. The graves of five of them can be found in Tidworth Military Cemetery buried together. Three aircrew also lost their lives.

The old brewery was requisitioned to house the extra airmen stationed at Netheravon aerodrome. About a dozen Land Army girls were also billeted there.

The Fox and Hounds pub next door was packed every night with service men from the near-by camps, including the airbourne lads from Bulford. Tidworth was full to capacity with Americans, extra barracks having to be built. With so many troops there was a shortage of water.

Purification plants were established at certain points along the river Avon, water being pumped into temporary tanks. One was at Haxton Red Bridge. About a dozen Americans were camped there to operate it, a nice bunch. Tanker lorries, even jeeps and trailers with jerry cans came in a constant stream to collect water. Troops were so desperate for a swim that many walked across the downs to Netheravon for a dip in the river at the mill. The period for these events would have been mainly during the summer of '43.

Flying Fortress and Liberator bombers of the USAF would fly over on their way to bomb targets on the Continent. Individual squadrons forming up high over us to make large formations of eighty plus aircraft, reaching such a height that they would leave vapour trails. They would leave about mid-morning and return mid-afternoon. I would count them when they went out, and again when they returned to see how many were missing. I would be taking the cows down the road to be milked about mid-afternoon. I remember the trials with rocket firing aircraft; a Swordfish was used first. It would fly very low up the valley from Boscombe to Compton Valley, where it would test fire the rockets. A target was slung across the narrow end of the valley, and the rockets were fired two at a time. Eight in total were carried, four under each wing. They weren't explosive, instead having concrete heads. We would stand on a high spot on the side of the valley and the plane would be about level with us when it fired.

The first 12,000lb live bomb was dropped on Larkhill impact area. People living in the villages around the range were told to open all doors and windows at 9 o'clock one summer evening in case of blast damage. It was dropped from a Lancaster. I remember seeing the flash and waiting for what seemed to be a long time before hearing the explosion.

The heavy bombardment of German positions at El Alamein was re-created on Larkhill ranges as a demonstration. 600 guns of all sizes with several squadrons of medium bombers - Bostons and Mitchels - dropping bombs. The guns were positioned around the impact area, firing into the middle. Stirling bombers in pairs would be seen some evenings at dusk, heading toward towards Southampton and the French coast to drop supplies to the French resistance, getting ready for the invasion. S.D Dryden 1998.



Above: Horsa Gliders.

Above: Whitley Bombers and Horsa Gliders, also some Dakotas can be seen in the background. Both of these photographs were taken in 1944.

Left: A dramatic and rare photograph of two planes colliding over Netheravon Airfield Camp. Probably around 1929.

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Sam's War Time Memories Part 5

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We got mixed up with an exercise near Larkhill. We were crossing through a large formation of tanks and Bren gun carriers of Guards Armoured Division on the high ground south of Wexland Bottom who were attacking Americans dug in around Larkhill. Suddenly American Spitfires appeared flying very low over the Guards. All hell broke loose. The tanks started firing smoke canisters and the carriers phosphorus smoke mortar bombs to cover themselves and which were exploding all around us. It was every man for himself. We eventually all met up, thinking ourselves very lucky to do so.

During the war the army could go anywhere and it would not be unusual for tanks to go into the fields. You would be working in the yard when suddenly the gate would open and vehicles such as jeeps and carriers would drive in and camouflage along-side the ricks etc. They did not usually interrupt the work.



One day, while I was working at Reg Sheppards, (on the left at the bottom of Haxton Hill) many Sergeants of the 6th Airbourne Division came marching down the hill. They had been watching a demonstration of tanks of the same division on Beaches Barn firing range who passed them as they went by me. It was snowing heavily at the time but not settling. They were all wearing great-coats I estimated there would have been at least 400 of them. Probably all the sergeants in the division. A sight I will never forget.

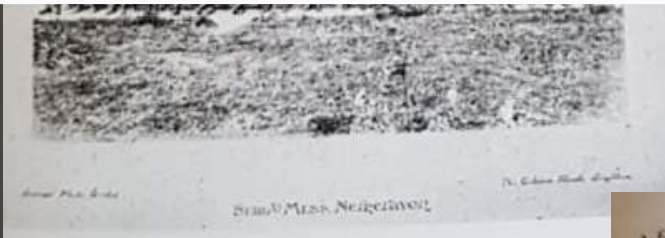
Food was short because of rationing so we got whatever we could to supplement it. Mushrooms, blackberries, wild raspberries, and elderberries in place of currants for fruit cakes and nuts. My mother once bought floor sweepings from biscuit factories, but you had to be careful when eating the puddings which they were turned into because of the wood splinters. We also went leazing (picking up heads of corn in the corn fields) after the farmer had finished harvesting. These were fed to the dozen or so hens we kept which gave us eggs. At one time coal was difficult to get. We found that cow pats when dry burnt as good as wood; we also burnt worn out leather boots found on a dump near-by.

When we went to school, we always had to carry our gasmasks. We should have carried them all the time, but we didn't. When the air raid siren sounded we were dispersed to 'safe' houses, my party going to the vicarage opposite the school where we would sit in the hallway until the all clear sounded.

Luther Kite had bought a new lorry just before the war started. The army commandeered it as it did all newish or good vehicles if the owners could carry on without them.

Canadian artillery once shelled Enford by mistake, killing several cows.





A few months before 'D' Day, we went on our bikes to Tidworth. We were keen to see the thousands of Americans stationed there. As we turned around the east side of Sidbury Hill an amazing site met our eyes. Stretching from Pennings Camp towards Tidworth were row upon row tanks, half-tracks and Lorries, all of them camouflaged. The soldiers looking after them were living in temporary huts made of packing cases sited at the base of the hill. Left on the site still are the concrete bases of the huts including one of the pre-fabricated lavatory block. We went on into Tidworth. It was swarming with Americans. Baseball was being played on every piece of grass big enough. The only British serviceman we saw was a sailor who looked very much out of place. 'D' Day was an important day to remember. I arrived at work at the usual of 7 o'clock not knowing what a historic occasion it was. I hadn't heard the news to know. About 9 o'clock a large formation of Flying Fortresses flew over low, going 'home'. My employer Reg Sheppard came walking up the track to the buildings just after that. I said to him, they have been out early today, not their usual time. He replied: haven't you heard? The second front has started. Nothing else was seen or heard of the event until the evening.

I was at Fittleton Drove getting rabbits food; I kept a lot as pets. In the far distance looking north-west I spotted Stirling bombers towing Horsa gliders climbing up from the horizon. They were obviously taking off from Keevil airfield. Not long after I noticed a large force of Dakotas towing Waco gliders. They were some way the other side Tidworth heading in the direction of Southampton. I returned home, fed the rabbits and went to meet my mates at Netheravon. A few minutes later the Stirlings flew over also in the direction of Southampton. There were 24 of them and they were marked with the 'D' Day black and white stripes. As we watched, our Head Master Mr Hart came along on his bike. He also stopped to watch. "Reinforcements for the Second Front I suppose," he said. "Good luck to them."

After 'D' Day, a silence descended on the plain, all of the troops having gone across the channel. The only thing of importance to happen locally during the war was aircraft passing over on their way to Arnhem and the other bridges. It was on a Sunday morning. The sun was just beginning to break through early morning mist. A large force of Dakotas passed over, we could just see some of them through the mist, although we could certainly hear them.



Sam Dryden on his bicycle
in 2002.



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Sam's War Time Memories Final Part

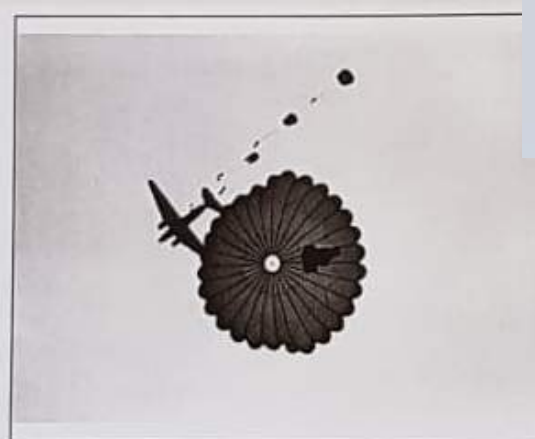
I remember Tom Leach - who had been a POW - coming home. He lived next door to us. He came up the road bent over with a kit bag over his shoulder. He was very thin and weak, his uniform hanging on him as though it was many times too big. His father had died while he was away and his mother, who was ill, was living with her daughter in Lower Street. What must have been his thoughts? It took him a long time to readjust to normal life.

I was working at Haxton Farm at the end of the war. One day Tom Manning and myself came out of the yard to go up to Haxton Hill to do a job. A soldier carrying his kit bag and suitcase was coming up the road from Netheravon. It was Jack Ferris just back from Italy, going home to Beaches Barn - a long walk. Tom took his kitbag and I put the suitcase on my bike. We went about half-way home with him.

What I remember most of all were the men who did not come back. Charlie Paull was killed on the retreat to Dunkirk; Jim Ferris killed on the 'D' Day landing; George Wise died in Italy; Captain Wyndham-Mallet killed at Calais; Charlie Baker and Ron McAlister were killed during the advance across Normandy.

S.D Dryden 1998.

Sam Dryden was born in Choulston in 1928, just inside of the Figheldean Parish border and was christened at Figheldean Church. He kept many diaries, not just of his wartime experiences, but with regards to his conservation work on Salisbury Plain and while working as a Forestry Officer on Salisbury Plain for the Ministry of Defence. When he retired he continued to write his diary concentrating on conservation issues and recording his many walks and cycle rides over the Plain, making note of the many bird, animal and plant life he found. He continued to do this right up to the September 2009. After undergoing a hip operation, he never recovered fully from the effects of the anaesthetic and he never wrote in his diary again. Today he is being cared for by the devoted staff at Cleveland Lodge in Figheldean having being diagnosed five weeks after his hip operation with dementia.



Photos from Netheravon archives.

